

CHARLOTTE M. BRAME

A MAD LOVE

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Bertha M. Clay

A Mad Love

CHAPTER I.

A DISCONTENTED BEAUTY

"Leone," cried a loud voice, "where are you? Here, there, everywhere, except just in the place where you should be."

The speaker was a tall, stout, good-tempered looking man. Farmer Noel people called him all over the country-side. He stood in the farmyard, looking all the warmer this warm day for his exertions in finding his niece.

"Leone," he cried again and again.

At last the answer came, "I am here, uncle," and if the first voice startled one with its loudness, this second was equally startling from its music, its depth, its pathos.

"I am here, uncle," she said. "I wish you would not shout so loudly. I am quite sure that the people at Rashleigh can hear you. What is it that you want?"

"Have you made up the packets of wheat I asked you for?" he said.

"No," she replied, "I have not."

He looked disappointed.

"I shall be late for market," he said. "I must do them myself."

He went back into the house without another word. He never reproached Leone, let her do what she would.

On Leone's most beautiful face were evident marks of bad temper, and she did not care to conceal it. With a gesture of impatience she started forward, passed over the farmyard and went through the gate out into the lane, from the lane to the high-road, and she stood there leaning over the white gate, watching the cattle as they drank from the deep, clear pool.

The sun shone full upon her, and the warm, sweet beams never fell on anything more lovely; the only drawback to the perfection of the picture was this: she did not look in harmony with the scene – the quiet English landscape, the golden cornfields, the green meadows, the great spreading trees whereon the birds sung, the tall spire of the little church, the quaint little town in the distance, the brook that ran gurgling by.

She looked out of harmony with them all; she would have been in perfect keeping had the background been of snow-capped mountains and foaming cascades. Here she looked out of place; she was on an English farm; she wore a plain English dress, yet she had the magnificent beauty of the daughters of sunny Spain. Her beauty was of a peculiar type – dark, passionate, and picturesque like that of the pomegranate, the damask rose or the passion-flower.

There was a world in her face – of passion, of genius, of power; a face as much out of place over the gates of a farm as a stately gladiolus would be among daisies and buttercups. An artist looking for a model of some great queen who had conquered the world, for some great heroine for whom men had fought madly and died, might have chosen her. But in a farmyard! there are no words to tell how out of place it was. She stood by the gate holding the ribbons of her hat in her hand – beautiful, imperious, defiant – with a power of passion about her that was perhaps her greatest characteristic.

She looked round the quiet picture of country life with unutterable contempt.

"If I could but fly away," she said; "I would be anything on earth if I could get away from this – I would not mind what; I would work, teaching, anything; the dull monotony of this life is killing me."

Her face was so expressive that every emotion was shown on it, every thought could be read there; the languid scorn of the dark eyes, and the proud curves of the daintily arched lips, all told of unconcealed contempt.

"A farm," she said to herself; "to think that when the world is full of beautiful places, my lot must be cast on a farm. If it had been in a palace, or a gypsy's camp – anywhere where I could have tasted life, but a farm."

The beautiful restless face looked contemptuously out on the green and fertile land.

"A farm means chickens running under one's feet, pigeons whirling round one's head, cows lowing, dogs barking, no conversation but crops – "

She stopped suddenly. Coming up the lane she saw that which had never gladdened her eyes here before; she saw a gentleman, handsome and young, walking carelessly down the high-road, and as he drew near, another gentleman, also handsome, but not quite so young, joined him.

They came laughing down the high-road together, but neither of them saw her until they reached the great elm-tree. The sight of that wondrous young face, with its rich, piquant beauty, startled them. One passed her by without a word, the other almost stopped, so entirely was he charmed by the lovely picture. As he passed he raised his hat; her beautiful face flushed; she neither smiled nor bowed in return, but accepted the salute as a tribute to her beauty, after the same fashion a queen acknowledges the salutes and homage of her subjects.

With one keen glance, she divided him from his companion, the man who had *not* bowed to her. She took in that one glance a comprehensive view. She knew the color of his eyes, of his hair, the shape of his face, the peculiar cut of his clothes, so different to those worn by the young farmers; the clustering hair, the clear-cut face, the delicate profile, the graceful ease of the tall, thin figure, were with her from that moment through all time.

The deep low bow gratified her. She knew that she was gifted with a wondrous dower of beauty. She knew that men were meek when a beautiful face charmed them. The involuntary homage of this handsome young man pleased her. She would have more of it. When he rejoined his companion, she heard him say:

"What a wonderful face, Euston – the most beautiful I have ever seen in my life."

That pleased her still more; she smiled to herself.

"Perhaps I shall see him again," she thought.

Then one of the girls from the village passed the gate, and stopped for a few minutes' conversation.

"Did you see those gentlemen?" asked the girl; and Leone answered:

"Yes."

"They have both come to live at Dr. Hervey's, to 'read,' whatever that means. The young one, with the fair hair, is a lord, the eldest son of a great earl; I do not remember the name."

So it was a great lord who had bowed to her, and thought her more beautiful than any one he had ever seen. Her heart beat with triumph.

She bade the girl good-morning, and went back. Her beautiful face was brilliant with smiles.

She entered the house and went up to her glass. She wanted to see again, for herself, the face he had called beautiful.

Mirrored there, she saw two dark eyes, full of fire, bright, radiant, and luminous – eyes that could have lured and swayed a nation; a beautiful, oval face, the features of which were perfect; a white brow, with dark, straight eyebrows; sweet, red lips, like a cloven rose; the most beautiful chin, with a rare dimple; an imperial face, suited for a queen's crown or the diadem of an empress, but out of place on this simple farm. She saw grand, sloping shoulders, beautiful arms, and a figure that was perfect in its symmetry and grace.

She smiled contentedly. She was beautiful, undoubtedly. She was glad that others saw it. If a young lord admired her, she must be worth admiring. Her good humor was quite restored.

How came it that this girl, with the beauty of a young princess, was at home in the farmhouse? It was a simple story. The farmer, Robert Noel, had only one brother, who loved romance and travel.

Stephen Noel, after trying every profession, and every means of obtaining a livelihood, at last decided on becoming a civil engineer; he went to Spain to help with a rail-road in the province of Andalusia, and there fell in love with and married a beautiful Andalusian, Pepita by name.

Dark-eyed Pepita died on the same day Leone was born, and the young father, distracted by his loss, took the child home to England. The old housekeeper at the Rashleigh farm took the girl, and Robert Noel consented that she should be brought up as a child of his own.

The two brothers differed as light and darkness differ. Stephen was all quickness and intelligence, Robert was stolid and slow. Leone always said it took him ten minutes to turn around. He had never married, he had never found time; but he gave the whole love of his heart to the beautiful dark eyed child who was brought to his house sixteen years ago.

CHAPTER II.

"WHAT, MARRY A FARMER!"

One can imagine the sensation that a bright, beautiful eagle would produce in a dove's nest; the presence of that beautiful, imperious child at the farm was very much the same. People looked at her in wonder; her beauty dazzled them; her defiance amused them. They asked each other where all her pride came from.

Uncle Robert often said in his slow fashion that he retired from business when Leone was seven. At that early age he gave the management of everything into her baby hands. From the chickens in the yard to the blue and white pigeons on the roof. She could manage him, big as he was, with one stamp of her little foot, one flash of her bright eyes; he was powerless at once, like a great big giant bound hand and foot. She was a strange child, full of some wonderful power that she hardly understood herself – a child quite out of the common groove of life, quite above the people who surrounded her. They understood her beauty, her defiance, her pride, but not the dramatic instinct and power that, innate in her, made every word and action seem strange.

Honest, stolid Robert Noel was bewildered by her; he did his best in every way, but he had an uneasy consciousness that his best was but a poor attempt. He sent her to school, the best in Rashleigh, but she learned anything and everything except obedience.

She looked out of place even there, this dark-eyed Spanish girl, among the pretty pink and white children with fair hair and blue eyes. She bewildered even the children; they obeyed her, and she had the greatest influence over them. She taught them recitations and plays, she fired their imaginations by wonderful stories; she was a new, brilliant, wonderful element in their lives. Even the school mistress, meek through the long suffering of years, even she worshiped and feared her – the brilliant, tiresome girl, who was like a flash of light among the others. She had a face so grand and a voice so thrilling it was no unusual thing when she was reading aloud in the school-room for the others to suspend all work, thrilled to the heart by the sound of her voice. She soon learned all that the Rashleigh governess could teach her – she taught herself even more. She had little taste for drawing, much for music, but her whole heart and soul were in books.

Young as she was, it was grand to hear her trilling out the pretty love speeches of Juliet, declaring the wrongs of Constance or Katherine, moaning out the woes of Desdemona. She had Shakespeare almost by heart, and she loved the grand old dramatist.

When she was sixteen her uncle took her from school, and then the perplexities of his honest life began. He wanted her to take her place as mistress of the house, to superintend the farm and the dairy, to take affectionate interest in the poultry and birds, to see that the butter was of a deep, rich yellow, and the new laid eggs sent to market. From the moment he intrusted those matters in her hands, his life became a burden to him, for they were entirely neglected.

Farmer Noel would go into his dairy and find everything wrong, the cream spilled, the butter spoiled; but when he looked at the dark-eyed young princess with the Spanish face he dared not say a word to her.

He would suggest to her meekly that things might be different. She would retaliate with some sarcasm that would reduce him to silence for two days at least. Yet she loved, after a fashion of her own, this great, stolid man who admired her with all his heart, and loved her with his whole soul.

So time passed until she was seventeen, and the quiet farm life was unendurable to her.

"Uncle," she would say, "let me go out into the world. I want to see it. I want something to do. I often think I must have two lives and two souls, I long so intensely for more than I have to fill them."

He could not understand her. She had the farm and the dairy.

"Be content," he would answer, "be content, my lady lass, with the home God has given you."

"I want something to do. If I did all the work on this and twenty other farms it would not touch my heart and soul. They are quite empty. People say it is a battlefield. If it be one, I am sitting by with folded hands. Inactivity means death to me."

"My lady lass, you can find plenty to do," he answered, solemnly.

"But not of the kind I want."

She paced up and down the large kitchen, where everything was polished and bright; the fire-light glowed on the splendid face and figure – the face with its unutterable beauty, its restless longing, its troubled desires.

Some fear for the future of the beautiful, restless, passionate girl came over the man, who watched her with anxious eyes. It began to dawn upon him, that if he were to shut a bright-eyed eagle up in a cage, it would never be happy, and it was very much the same kind of thing to shut this lovely, gifted girl in a quiet farmhouse.

"You will be married soon," he said, with a clumsy attempt at comfort, "and then you will be more content."

She flashed one look of scorn from those dark, lustrous eyes that should have annihilated him. She stopped before him, and threw back her head with the gesture of an injured queen.

"May I ask," she said, "whom you suppose I will marry?"

He looked rather frightened, for he began to perceive he had made some mistake, though he could not tell what; he thought all young girls liked to be teased about sweethearts and marriage; still he came valiantly to the front.

"I mean that you will surely have a sweetheart some day or other," he said, consolingly, though the fire from those dark eyes startled him, and her scarlet lips trembled with anger.

"I shall have a sweetheart, you think, like Jennie Barnes or Lily Coke. A sweetheart. Pray, whom will it be, do you think?"

"I know several of the young farmers about here who would each give his right hand to be a sweetheart of yours."

She laughed a low, contemptuous laugh that made him wince.

"What, marry a farmer! Do you think the life of a farmer's wife would suit me? I shall go unmarried to my grave, unless I can marry as I choose."

Then she seemed to repent of the passionate words, and flung her beautiful arms round his neck and kissed his face.

"I hate myself," she said, "when I speak in that way to you, who have been so good to me."

"I do not mind it," said Robert Noel, honestly. "Never hate yourself for me, my lady lass."

She turned one glance from her beautiful eyes on him.

"When I seem to be ungrateful to you, do remember that I am not, Uncle Robert; I am always sorry. I cannot help myself, I cannot explain myself; but I feel always as though my mind and soul were cramped."

"Cramp is a very bad thing," said the stolid farmer.

She looked at him, but did not speak; her irritation was too great; he never understood her; it was not likely he ever would.

"I will go down to the mill-stream," she said.

With an impatient gesture she hastened out of the house.

The mill-stream was certainly the prettiest feature of the farm – a broad, beautiful stream that ran between great rows of alder-trees and turned the wheel by the force with which it leaped into the broad, deep basin; it was the loveliest and most picturesque spot that could be imagined, and now as the waters rushed and foamed in the moonlight they were gorgeous to behold.

Leone loved the spot; the restless, gleaming waters suited her; it seemed to have something akin to herself – something restless, full of force and vitality. She sat there for hours; it was her usual refuge when the world went wrong with her.

Round and round went the wheel; on sunlight days the sun glinted on the sullen waters until they resembled a sheet of gold covered with white, shining foam. Green reeds and flowers that love both land and water fringed the edges of the clear, dimpling pool; the alder-trees dipped their branches in it; the great gray stones, covered with green moss, lay here and there. It was a little poem in itself, and the beautiful girl who sat in the moonlight read it aright.

CHAPTER III. THE MEETING AT THE MILL

In the depths of the water she saw the reflection of the shining stars; she watched them intently; the pure, pale golden eyes. A voice aroused her – a voice with tone and accent quite unlike any other voice.

"I beg your pardon," it said, "could you show me the way to Rashleigh? I have lost myself in the wood."

Raising her eyes she saw the gentleman who had raised his hat as he passed her in the morning. She knew that he recognized her by the light that suddenly overspread his face.

"Rashleigh lies over there," she replied. "You have but to cross the field and pass the church."

"Even that," said the stranger, with a careless laugh, "even that I am not inclined to do now. It is strange. I am afraid you will think me half mad, but it seems to me that I have just stepped into fairy land. Two minutes since I was on the bare highway, now I see the prettiest picture earth has to offer."

"It is pretty," she replied, her eyes looking at the clear, dimpling pool; "prettier now even than when the sun shines on it and the wheel turns."

She had told him the way to Rashleigh, and he should have passed on with a bow, but this was his excuse. The moon was shining bright as day, the wind murmured in the alder trees, the light lay on the clear, sweet, fresh water; the music of the water as it fell was sweet to hear. Away in the woods some night bird was singing; the odor of the sleeping flowers filled the air; and there on the green bank, at the water's edge, sat the most beautiful girl he had ever seen in his life.

The moonlight fell on her exquisite southern face; it seemed to find its home in the lustrous depths of her dark eyes; it kissed the dark ripples of her hair, worn with the simple grace of a Greek goddess; it lay on the white hands that played with the tufted grass.

He was young and loved all things beautiful, and therefore did not go away. His mind was filled with wonder. Who was she – this girl, so like a young Spanish princess! Why was she sitting here by the mill-stream? He must know, and to know he must ask.

"I am inclined," he said, "to lie down here by this pretty stream, and sleep all night under the stars; I am so tired."

She looked at him with a quick, warm glow of sympathy.

"What has tired you?" she asked.

He sat down on one of the great gray stones that lay half in the water, half on the land.

"I have lost myself in the Leigh woods," he said. "I have been there many hours. I had no idea what Leigh woods were like, or I should not have gone for the first time alone."

"They are very large and intricate," she said; "I can never find the right paths."

"Some one told me I should see the finest oak-trees in England there," he said, "and I have a passion for grand old oaks. I would go anywhere to see them. I went to the woods and had very soon involved myself in the greatest difficulties. I should never have found the way out had I not met one of the keepers."

She liked to listen to him; the clear, refined accent, the musical tone; as she listened a longing came over her that his voice might go on speaking to her and of her.

"Now," he continued, embarrassed by her silence, "I have forgotten your directions; may I ask you to repeat them?"

She did so, and looking at her face he saw there was no anger, nothing but proud, calm content. He said to himself he need not go just yet, he could stay a few minutes longer.

"Do you know that beautiful old German ballad," he said,

"In sheltered vale a mill-wheel
Still tunes its tuneful lay?"

"No; I never heard or read it," she answered. "Say it for me."

"In sheltered vale a mill-wheel
Still tunes its tuneful lay.
My darling once did dwell there,
But now she's far away.
A ring in pledge I gave her,
And vows of love we spoke —
Those vows are all forgotten,
The ring asunder broke."

"Hush," she said, holding up one white hand; "hush, it is too sad. Do you not see that the moonlight has grown dim, and the sound of the falling waters is the sound of falling tears?"

He did not seem to understand her words.

"That song has haunted me," he said, "ever since I heard it. I must say the last verse; it must have been of this very mill-wheel it was written.

"But while I hear the mill-wheel
My pains will never cease;
I would the grave could hide me,
For there alone is peace."

"Is it a love story?" she asked, pleased at the pathos and rhythm of the words.

"Yes; it is the usual story – the whole love of a man's heart given to one not worthy of it, the vows forgotten, the ring broken. Then he cries out for the grave to hide himself and his unhappy love."

She looked up at him with dark, lustrous, gleaming eyes.

"Does all love end in sorrow?" she asked, simply.

He looked musingly at the moonlit waters, musingly at the starlit sky.

"I cannot tell," he replied, "but it seems to me that it ends more in sorrow than in joy. I should say," he continued, "that when truth meets truth, where loyalty meets loyalty, the ending is good; but where a true heart finds a false one, where loyalty and honor meet lightness and falsehood, then the end must be bad."

Leone seemed suddenly to remember that she was talking to a stranger, and, of all subjects, they had fallen on love.

"I must go," she said, hurriedly. "You will remember the way."

"Pray do not go – just this minute," he said. "History may repeat itself; life never does. There can never be a night half so fair as this again; the water will never fall with so sweet a ripple; the stars will never shine with so bright a light; life may pass, and we may never meet again. You have a face like a poem. Stay a few minutes longer."

"A face like a poem." Did he really think so?

The words pleased her.

"Strange things happen in real life," he said; "things that, told in novels and stories, make people laugh and cry out that they are exaggerated, too romantic to be real. How strange that I should have met you here this evening by the side of the mill-stream – a place always haunted by poetry and romance. You will think it stranger still when I tell you your face has haunted me all day."

She looked at him in surprise. The proud, beautiful face grieved at the words.

"How is that?" she asked.

"I saw you this morning when I was going to Rashleigh with my friend, Sir Frank Euston. You were standing against a white gate, and I thought – well, I must not tell you what I thought."

"Why?" she asked, briefly.

"Because it might offend you," he replied.

He began to perceive that there was no coquetry in this beautiful girl. She was proud, with a calm, serene, half-tragic pride. There would be no flirtation by the side of the mill-stream. She looked as far above coquetry as she was above affectation. He liked the proud calm of her manner. She might have been a duchess holding court rather than a country girl sitting by a mill-wheel. The idea occurred to him; and then his wonder increased – who was she? and what was she doing here?

"Do you live near here?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, "behind the trees there you can see the chimneys of a farmhouse; it is called Rashleigh Farm; my uncle, Robert Noel, lives there; and I am his niece."

"His niece," repeated the young man, in an incredulous voice. She was a farmer's niece, then, after all; and yet she looked like a Spanish princess.

"You do not look like an English girl," he said, gravely.

"My father was English and my mother a Spanish lady; and I – well, I fear I have more of the hot fire of Spain than of the chill of England in my nature; my face is Spanish, so is my heart."

"A Spaniard is quick to love, quick to hate; forgives grandly and revenges mercilessly," he said.

"That is my character," she said; "you have described it exactly."

"I do not believe it; neither hate nor revenge could exist with a face like yours. Then your name is Noel?"

"Yes, my name is Leone Noel," she replied.

"Leone," he repeated, "that is a beautiful name. I have never heard it before; but I like it very much; it is musical and rare – two great things in a name."

"It is a German name," she said. "My uncle Robert hates it; he says it reminds him of Lion; but you know it is pronounced Leon. My mother read some German story that had the name in it and gave it to me."

"It suits you," he said, simply; "and I should not think there was another name in the world that would. I wonder," he added, with a shy laugh, "if you would like my name? It is Lancelot Chandos. My friends call me Lance."

"Yes, I like that. I know all the history of Sir Lancelot. I admire him; but I think he was a weak man – do not you?"

"For loving Queen Guinevere? I do not know. Some love is strength, not weakness," he replied. Leone looked up at him again.

"Are you the son of a great lord?" she asked; "some one told me so."

"Yes; my father is Earl of Lanswell; and people would call him a great earl. He is rich and powerful."

"What has brought you, the son of a great earl, down to Rashleigh?" she asked.

"My own idleness, to begin with," he said. "I have been at Oxford more years than I care to count; and I have idled my time."

"Then you are studying?" she said.

"Yes, that is it. I am trying to make up for lost time. I have some examinations to pass; and my father has sent me down to Dr. Hervey because he is known everywhere as the cleverest coach in England."

A cloud came for just one half minute across the face of the moon; the soft, sweet darkness startled Leone.

"I must go now," she said; "it is not only getting late, but growing dark."

"I shall see you again," he cried, "do promise me."

"Nay, you have little faith in promises," she replied; and he watched her as she vanished from among the alder-trees.

It was an unexpected meeting; and strange and startling consequences soon followed.

CHAPTER IV. AN INTERESTING TETE-A-TETE

"Where have you been, Leone?" asks Farmer Noel.

She had begun a new life. It seemed years since she had left him, while he sat in the same place, smoking the same pipe, probably thinking the same thoughts. She came in with the brightness and light of the moon in her face; dew-drops lay on her dark hair, her beautiful face was flushed with the wind, so fair, so gracious, so royal, so brilliant. He looked at her in helpless surprise.

"Where have you been?" he repeated.

She looked at him with a sweet, dreamy smile.

"I have been to the mill-stream." And she added in a lower tone, "I have been to heaven."

It had been heaven to her – this one hour spent with one refined by nature and by habit – a gentleman, a man of taste and education. Her uncle wondered that evening at the light that came on her face, at the cheerful sound of her voice, the smile that came over her lips. She was usually so restless and discontented.

It was a break in her life. She wanted something to interrupt the monotony, and now it had come. She had seen and spoken to not only a very handsome and distinguished man, but a lord, the son of an earl. He had admired her, said her face was like a poem; and the words brought a sweet, musing smile to her face.

When the sun shone in her room the next morning she awoke with a sense of something new and beautiful in her life; it was a pleasure to hear the birds sing; a pleasure to bathe in the clear, cold, fresh water; a pleasure to breathe the sweet, fragrant morning air. There was a half wonder as to whether she could see him again.

The poetical, dramatic instinct of the girl was all awake; she tried to make herself as pretty as she could. She put on a dress of pale pink – a plain print, it is true, but the beautiful head and face rose from it as a flower from its leaves.

She brushed back the rippling hair and placed a crimson rose in its depths. Then she smiled at herself. Was it likely she should see him? What should bring the great son of an earl to the little farm at Rashleigh? But the blue and white pigeons, the little chickens – all fared well that morning. Leone was content.

In the afternoon Farmer Noel wanted her to go down to the hay-fields. The men were busy with the newly mown hay, and he wished her to take some messages about the stacking of it. She looked like a picture of summer as she walked through the green, shady lane, a red rose in her hair and one in her breast, a cluster of woodbine in her hand. She saw nothing of Lord Chandos, yet she thought of nothing else; every tree, every field, every lane she passed she expected to see him; but of course he was not there; and her heart beat fast as she saw him – he was crossing what people called the Brook Meadow – and she met him face to face.

They had met for the first time on a moonlight night; they met for the second time on a sultry summer afternoon, when the whole world seemed full of love. The birds were singing of love in the trees, the butterflies were making love to the flowers, the wind was whispering of love to the trees, the sun was kissing the earth that lay silent in its embrace.

"Leone," he cried; and then he flushed crimson. "I beg your pardon," he said, "but I ought to say Miss Noel; but I have been thinking of you all night as Leone. I did not think of it before I spoke."

She laughed at the long apology.

"Say it all over again," she said. "Begin at 'Good-afternoon, Miss Noel.'"

He repeated it after her, then added:

"I think my kind and good fortune sent me this way. I was longing for some one to speak to – and of all happiness to meet you; but perhaps you are busy."

"No; I have done all that I had to do. I am never busy," she added, with regal calm.

He smiled again.

"No; I could not fancy you busy," he said, "any more than I could fancy the goddess Juno in a hurry. To some fair women there belongs by birthright a calm that is almost divine."

"My calm covers a storm," she replied. "My life has been brief and dull; neither my heart nor my soul has really lived; but I feel in myself a capability of power that sometimes frightens me."

He did not doubt it as he looked at the beautiful, passionate face; it was even more lovely in the gleam of the sunlight than in the soft, sweet light of the moon.

"You cannot stand in the sunshine," he said. "If you are not busy will you go with me through Leigh Woods? I shall remember the way this time."

She hesitated one half minute, and he saw it; he raised his hat and stood bare-headed, waiting for her answer.

"Yes, I will go," she said at length. "Why should I not?"

They went together to Leigh Woods, where the great oak-trees made a pleasant shade, and the ground was a mass of wild flowers; great streams of bluebells that stirred so gently in the wind, violets that hid themselves under their leaves, cowslips like little tips of gold, wild strawberry blossoms that looked like snow-flakes.

How fair it was. The sunbeams fell through the great green boughs, throwing long shadows on the grass. It was a beautiful, silent world, all perfume and light. The poetry of it touched both of them.

Lord Chandos was the first to speak; he had been watching the proud, beautiful face of Leone; and suddenly he said:

"You look out of place here, Miss Noel; I can hardly tell you why."

"That is what my uncle says; he is always asking me if I cannot make myself more like the girls of Rashleigh."

"I hope you never will," he cried, warmly.

"I do not know how," she said. "I must always be what God and nature made me."

"They made you fair enough," he whispered.

And then he owned to himself that she was not like other girls.

She drew back proudly, swiftly; no smile came to her lips, no laughing light to her eyes.

"Speak to me as you would to one in your own rank, my lord," she said, haughtily. "Though fate has made me a farmer's niece, nature made me –"

"A queen," he interrupted.

And she was satisfied with the acknowledgment. They sat down under one of the great oak-trees, a great carpet of bluebells under their feet.

Leone looked thoughtful; she gathered some sprays of bluebells and held them in her hands, her white fingers toying with the little flowers, then she spoke:

"I know," she said, "that no lady – for instance, in your own rank of life – would walk through this wood with you on a summer's afternoon."

A laugh came over his handsome, happy young face.

"I do not know. I am inclined to think the opposite."

"I do not understand what you would call etiquette; but I am quite sure you would never ask one."

"I am not sure. If I had met one in what you are pleased to call my rank of life last night by the mill-stream, looking as you looked, I am quite sure that I should ask her to walk with me and talk with me at any time."

"I should like to see your world," she said. "I know the world of the poor and the middle class, but I do not know yours."

"You will know some day," he said, quietly. "Do not be angry with me if I tell you that in all my world I have never seen one like you. Do not be angry, I am not flattering you, I am saying just what I think."

"Why do you think that some day I may see your world?" she asked.

"Because with your face you are sure to marry well," he replied.

"I shall marry where I love," said Leone.

"And you may love where you will," he replied; "no man will ever resist you."

"I would rather you did not speak to me in that fashion," she said, gravely; and Lord Chandos found, that seated by this farmer's niece, in the wood full of bluebells, he was compelled to be more circumspect than if he were speaking to some countess-elect in a Mayfair drawing-room. Leone, when she had set him quite straight in his place, as she called it; when she had taught him that he was to treat her with as much, if not more courtesy, than he bestowed on those of his own rank; Leone, when she had done all this, felt quite at home with him. She had never had an opportunity for exercising her natural talent for conversation; her uncle was quite incapable of following or understanding her; the girls who were her companions lost themselves in trying to follow her flights of fancy.

But now there was some one who understood her; talk as she would, he appreciated it; he knew her quotations; no matter how original her ideas were he understood and followed them; it was the first time she had ever had the opportunity of talking to an educated gentleman.

How she enjoyed it; his wit seemed waiting on hers, and seemed to catch fire from it; his eyes caught fire from hers. She described her simple life and its homely surroundings in words that burned.

It was in her simple, sweet, pathetic description of stolid Uncle Robert that she excelled herself; she painted his character with the most graphic touches.

"Do you know, Miss Noel," said Lord Chandos at last, "that you are a genius, that you have a talent truly marvelous: that you can describe a character or a place better than I have heard any one else?"

"No, I did not know anything about it," she said. "I am so accustomed to being looked upon as something not to be understood, admired, or imitated that I can hardly believe that I am clever. Uncle Robert is really a character; nowadays men and women are very much alike; but he stands out in bold relief, quite by himself, the slowest, the most stolid of men, yet with a great heart full of love."

It was so pleasant to talk to him and see his handsome young face full of admiration; to startle him by showing her talent, so pleasant that the whole of the summer afternoon had passed before she thought of the time; and he was equally confused, for Dr. Hervey's dinner-hour was over. And yet they both agreed it was the most pleasant hour they had ever spent.

CHAPTER V. THE RECONCILIATION

It was, of course, the old story; there were one or two meetings by the mill-stream, a morning spent together in some distant hay-field, an afternoon in the woods, and then the mischief was done – they loved each other.

"Alas, how easily things go wrong —
A sigh too deep or a kiss too long;
Then follows a mist and a weeping rain —
And life is never the same again."

It soon became not merely a habit but a necessity for them to meet every day. Farmer Noel understood perfectly well the art of tilling the ground, of sowing the crops, of making the earth productive, but he knew less than a child of the care and watchfulness his young niece required. He contented himself by asking where she had been; he never seemed to imagine that she had had a companion. He saw her growing more and more beautiful, with new loveliness on her face, with new light in her eyes, with a thousand charms growing on her, but he never thought of love or danger – in fact, above the hay-making and the wheat, Farmer Noel did not think at all.

She had gone into the glowing heart of fairyland – all the old life was left far behind; she did not even seem to remember that she had been restless and discontented; that in her soul she had revolted fiercely against her fate; that she had disliked her life and longed for anything that would change it; all that was forgotten; the golden glamour of love had fallen over her, and everything was changed. He was young – this brave, generous, gallant lover of hers – only twenty, with a heart full of romance. He fairly worshiped the proud, beautiful girl who carried herself with the stately grace of a young queen. He had fallen in love after the fashion of his age – madly, recklessly, blindly – ready to go mad or to die for his love; after the fashion of his age and sex he loved her all the more because of her half-cold reserve, her indomitable pride, her haughty rejection of all flattery.

Young girls do not always know the secret of their power; a little reserve goes further than the most loving words. Leone's pride attracted Lord Chandos quite as much as her beauty. The first little quarrel they had was an outburst of pride from her; they had been strolling through the sunniest part of Leigh Woods, and when it was time to part he bent down to kiss the warm, white hand. She drew it quickly from him.

"You would not have done that to one of your own class," she cried; "why do you do it to me?"

"You are not really angry, Leone?" he cried in wonder.

She turned her beautiful face, colorless with indignation, to him.

"I am so far angry," she said, "that I shall not walk through the woods with you – never again."

She kept her word. For two whole days Lord Chandos wandered through the fields and the lanes, through the woods and by the river, yet he saw no sight of her. It was possible that she punished herself quite as much as she did him; but he must be taught that, were he twenty times an earl, he must never venture on even the least liberty with her; he must wait her permission before he kissed her hand.

The fourth day – he could bear it no longer – he rode past the farm twenty times and more; at length he was fortunate enough to see Farmer Noel, and throwing the reins on his horse's neck he got down and went up to him.

"Have you a dog to sell?" he asked. "Some one told me you had very fine dogs."

"I have good dogs, but none to sell," replied the farmer.

"I want a dog, and I would give a good price for a good one," he said. "Will you let me see yours?"

"Yes, you can see them, but you cannot buy them," said Robert Noel; and the next scene was the handsome young lordling going round the farm, with the stalwart, stolid farmer.

He won the farmer's heart by his warm praises of the farm, the cattle, the dogs, and everything else he saw; still there was no Leone.

"I am very thirsty; should you think me very impertinent if I asked you for a glass of cider?" he said; and the farmer, flattered by the request, took him into the little parlor. He looked at his visitor in simple wonder.

"They say you are a great lord's son," he said; "but if you are, you have no pride about you."

Lord Chandos laughed; and the farmer called Leone. There was a pause, during which the young lord's heart beat and his face flushed.

"Leone," cried the farmer again.

He turned to his visitor.

"You will wonder what 'Leone' means, it is such a strange name; it is my niece. Here she comes."

The loveliest picture in all the world, trying hard to preserve her usual stately grace, yet with a blushing, dimpling smile that made her lovely beyond words.

"Leone," said the farmer, "will you bring a jug of cider?"

"Pray," cried the lord, "do not trouble yourself, Miss Noel. I cannot think –"

She interrupted him by a gesture of her white hand.

"I will send it, uncle," she said, and disappeared.

The farmer turned with a smile to the young lord.

"She is very proud," he said; "but she is a fine girl."

The cider came; the visitor duly drank his glass and went; his only reward for all that trouble was the one glance at her face.

That same evening a little note was given to her, in which he begged her so humbly to forgive him, and to meet him again, that she relented.

He had learned his lesson; he wooed her with the deference due to a young princess; no word or action of his displeased her after that, while he loved her with a love that was akin to madness.

So through the long, bright, beautiful summer days, in the early morning, while the sweet, fragrant air seemed to sweep the earth, and in the evening when the dew lay upon flower and tree, they met and learned to love each other.

One evening, as they sat by their favorite spot – the mill-stream – Lord Chandos told her how he had learned to love her, how he had ceased to think of anything in the world but herself.

"I knew you were my fate, Leone," he said, "when I saw you sitting here by the mill-stream. I am quite sure that I have loved you ever since. I do not remember that there has been one moment in which I have not thought of you. I shall always thank Heaven that I came to Rashleigh – I found my darling here."

For once all the pride had died from her face; all the hauteur was gone from her eyes; a lovely gleam of tenderness took its place; a love-light in the shy, sweet eyes that dropped from his.

"My darling Leone," he said, "if I lived a hundred years I could only say over and over again – 'I love you.' Those three words say everything. Do you love me?"

She looked up at him. Then she raised her dark eyes to his and a little quiver passed over her beautiful mouth.

"Yes, I love you," she said. "Whether it be for weal or for woe, for good or ill, I know not; but I love you."

There was unutterable pathos, unutterable music in those three words; they seemed to rhyme with the chime of the falling waters. She held out her white hands, he clasped them in his.

"Why do you say it so sadly, my darling? Love will bring nothing but happiness for you and for me," he said.

She laid her white arms on his neck, and looked earnestly in his face.

"There can be no comparison," she said. "Love to you is only a small part of your life, to me it is everything – everything. Do you understand? If you forget me or anything of that kind, I could not bear it. I could not school myself into patience as model women do. I should come and throw myself into the mill-stream."

"But, my darling, I shall never forget you – never; you are life of my life. I might live without the air and the sunlight; I might live without sleep or food, but never without you. I must forget my own soul before I forget you."

Still the white hands clasped his shoulders and the dark eyes were fixed on his face.

"You and your love are more than that to me," she said. "I throw all my life on this one die; I have nothing else – no other hope. Ah, think well, Lance, before you pledge your faith to me; it means so much. I should exact it whole, unbroken and forever."

"And I would give it so," he replied.

"Think well of it," she said again, with those dark, earnest eyes fixed on his face. "Let there be no mistake, Lance. I am not one of the meek Griselda type; I should not suffer in silence and resignation, let my heart break, and then in silence sink into an early grave. Ah, no, I am no patient Griselda. I should look for revenge and many other things. Think well before you pledge yourself to me. I should never forgive – never forget. There is time now – think before you seal your fate and mine."

"I need not think, Leone," he answered, quietly. "I have thought, and the result is that I pledge you my faith forever and ever."

The earnest, eager gaze died from her eyes, and the beautiful face was hidden on his breast.

"Forever and ever, sweet," he whispered; "do you hear? in all time and for all eternity, I pledge you my love and my faith."

The water seemed to laugh as it rippled on, the wind laughed as it bent the tall branches, the nightingale singing in the wood stopped suddenly, and its next burst of song was like ringing laughter; the mountains quivered over the mill-stream, the stars seemed to tremble as they shone.

"Forever and ever," he repeated. The wind seemed to catch up the words and repeat them, the leaves seemed to murmur them, the fall of the water to rhyme with them. "Forever and ever, sweet, I pledge you my love and my faith; our hearts will be one, and our souls one, and you will give me the same love in return, my sweet?"

"I give you even more than that," she replied, so earnestly that the words had a ring of tragedy in them; and then bending forward, he kissed the sweet lips that were for evermore to be his own.

"You are mine now forever," he said, "my wife, who is to be."

She was quite silent for some minutes; then, looking up at him, she said:

"I wish you had never sung that pretty ballad of the mill-wheel to me; do you know what the water always says when I listen?

""Those vows are all forgotten,
The ring asunder broken.""

"My darling," he said, clasping her to his heart, "no words that have any ring of doubt in them will ever apply to us, let the mill-stream say what it will."

CHAPTER VI.

AN IMPATIENT LOVER'S PLANS

There had been no mistake about the wooing of Lord Chandos. He had not thought of loving and riding away; the proud, beautiful, gifted girl whom he loved had been wooed and pursued with the ardor and respect that he would have shown to a princess.

There came another day, when something had prevented him from seeing her; and unable to control his impatience, he had ridden over to the farm, this time ostensibly to see the farmer, and ask for another glass of his famous cider; this time, under the farmer's eyes even, he stopped and spoke to Leone.

"You will be at the mill-stream this evening?" he whispered, and her answer was:

"Yes."

When he had drunk the cider and ridden away, Farmer Noel turned to his niece.

"A fine young man that, Leone; but what did he say to you?"

"Nothing particular; something about the mill-stream," replied the proud lips, that disdained a lie.

"Because," said Robert Noel, slowly, "you have a beautiful face of your own, my lady lass, and a young man like that would be sure to admire it."

"What matter if he did, uncle?" she asked.

"Harm would come of it," replied the farmer; "what a man admires he often loves; and no good would come of such a love as that."

"Why not?" she asked again, with flushed face and flashing eyes. "Why not?"

"We reckon in these parts," said the farmer, slowly, "that there is too great a difference between the aristocracy and the working-people. To put it in plain words, my lady lass, when a great lord or a rich man admires a poor lass, as a rule it ends in her disgrace."

"Not always," she answered, proudly.

"No, perhaps not always; but mostly, mostly," repeated Robert Noel. "You have a beautiful face, and, if you are wise, you will keep out of that young gentleman's way. I should not like to offend you, Leone; you will excuse me for speaking plainly."

"It does not offend me," she said, simply; "although I do not think that you are right. Why should not a lord, great and rich as this one, marry a girl who has no drawback but poverty? I do not see such a great difference."

"I cannot tell you, my lady lass, either the why or the wherefore," he replied. "I know that rich men do not marry poor and obscure girls; and if they do, there is sure to be something wrong with the marriage. We will not talk about it, only if he seems to admire you at all, do you keep out of that young man's way."

She made him no answer; his care for her touched her, but then there was no need. Lord Chandos was unlike other men; besides which he loved her so well he could not live without her.

So, when the sun was setting in the western sky, she went down to the mill-stream, where her lover awaited her.

The crimson clouds were reflected in the rippling water, the birds were singing in the trees, the flowers were all falling asleep; the fair, fragrant world was getting ready for its time of rest.

"Leone," he cried, seizing her hands and drawing her toward him, "my darling, I thought to-day would never come. How many hours did yesterday hold?"

"Twenty-four," she replied.

"Only twenty-four? Why, it seemed to me it was a day as long as a year, and I asked myself one question, sweet."

"What was it, Lance?"

"This: that if one day seemed so terribly long, what would become of me if I had to pass a week without you?"

"What would become of you?" she said, laughingly.

"I should die of my own impatience," he said, his handsome young face flushing. "Fate may try me as it will," he added, "but it must never separate me from you. It is because I have found this out that I have asked you to meet me here to-night. I cannot live without you, Leone; you understand that the hours are long and dark; life seems all ended, I cannot feel interest or energy; I am longing for you all the time, just as thirsty flowers are longing for dew. Leone, I should long until the fever of my own longing killed me – for you."

He drew the beautiful face to his own, and kissed it with a passion words could never tell.

"Why should I not be happy in my own way?" he said. "If I want the one only thing on earth that could bring me my happiness, why should I not have it? Of what use is money, wealth, position, rank, anything else on earth to me, unless I have you. I would rather lose all I have in the world than lose you."

"It is sweet to be loved so well," she said, with a sigh.

"I have had letters from home to-day," he said, "and I – I am half afraid to tell you lest you should say no. I am to leave Rashleigh in one month from now, and to go to my father's house – Cawdor, it is called. Leone, I cannot go alone."

She looked at him with wondering eyes; the ardent young lover who believed his love to be so great and so generous, yet who, in reality, loved himself best, even in his love.

"Darling, I want you to consent to be my wife before I leave Rashleigh," he continued. "I know it will be the best and easiest plan if I can but win your consent."

Her loving heart seemed almost to stand still; the crimson clouds and the rippling waters seemed to meet; even in her dreams she had never imagined herself his wife.

Lord Chandos continued:

"I know my parents well; my father is inflexible on some points, but easily influenced; my mother is, I believe, the proudest woman in the wide world. I know that she expects something wonderful from me in the way of marriage; I hardly think that there is a peeress in England that my mother would deem too good for me, and it would wound her to the heart should I marry a woman beneath me in rank. Indeed I know she would never forgive me."

She uttered a little, low cry.

"Then why have you loved me?" she asked.

Her lover laughed.

"How could I help it, my darling? In you I have found the other half of my own soul. I could no more help loving you than a bird can help singing. But listen, Leone; it is as I say, if I were to go home and pray all day to them it would be useless. I have another plan. Marry me, and I can take you to them and say, 'This is my wife.' They could not help receiving you then, because the marriage could not be undone, and my mother, with her worldly tact, would make the best of it then. If I ask permission to marry you, they will never grant it; if I marry you, they will be compelled to forgive it."

She drew herself half proudly from him.

"I do not wish any one to be compelled to receive me, nor do I wish to be the cause of unpleasantness," she said.

"My darling, all lovers have something to suffer. The course of true love cannot run smooth. Surely you would not desert me, or forsake me, or refuse to love me because I cannot change the opinion of my conservative parents. I know no lady, no peeress in England, who is half so beautiful, so clever as you – not one. I shall be more proud to take you home as Lady Chandos than if you were a queen's daughter. You believe me?"

"Yes, I believe *you*," she replied.

"Never mind any one else, Leone. My father admires beautiful women; he will be sure to love you; my mother will be very disagreeable at first, but in a short time she will learn to love you, and then all will be well."

The little white hand clung to him.

"You are quite sure, Lance?" she said, with a sob – "quite sure?"

"Yes, sweet, I am more than sure. You will be Lady Chandos, of Cawdor, and that is one of the oldest and grandest titles in England."

"But will your mother forgive you and love you again?" she asked, anxiously.

"Yes, believe me. And now, Leone, let me tell you my plans. They are all rather underhand, but we cannot help that; everything is fair in love and war. About twenty miles from here there is a sleepy little village called Oheton. I was there yesterday, and it was there that this plan came to me. Oh, my darling, turn your sweet face to me and let me be quite sure that you are listening."

"I am listening, Lance," she said.

"No, not with all your heart. See how well I understand you. Your eyes linger on the water, and the falling of it makes music, and the rhyme of the music is:

""These vows were all forgotten,
The ring asunder broken.'"

When will you trust me more thoroughly, Leone?"

She glanced at him with something of wonder, but more of fear.

"How do you know what I am thinking of?" she asked.

"I can guess from the tragical expression of your face, and the pathos of your eyes as they linger on the falling water. Now, you shall not look at the mill-stream, look at me."

She raised her dark, lustrous eyes to his face, and he went on:

"Over in this sleepy little village of Oheton, Leone – it is a sleepy village – the houses are all divided from each other by gardens and trees. Unlike most villagers, the people do not seem to know each other, you do not hear any gossip; the people, the houses, the streets, all seem sleepy together. At one end of the village is a church, one of the most quaint, an old Norman church, that has stood like a monument while the storms of the world raged around it; the vicar is the Reverend Josiah Barnes."

"Why are you telling me all this?" she asked.

"You will soon understand," he replied. "The Reverend Mr. Barnes is over sixty, and he, together with the people, the houses, and the streets, seems sleepy; nothing would excite him, or interest him, or startle him.

"Now, Leone, I have taken lodgings for myself for three weeks in this sleepy village; no one will take any notice of me; I shall go and come just as I will; then I shall have the bans of our marriage published. The dear old vicar will read them in his sleepy tones:

"I publish the bans of marriage for the first time between Lancelot Chandos and Leone Noel.' No one will hear the names plainly, and those who do will not know to whom they belong, and there will be no impediment; will there, Leone?"

The water laughed as it hurried over the stones.

"No impediment," it seemed to say; "no impediment, Leone."

CHAPTER VII. A FRIEND'S ADVICE

"But," asked Leone, anxiously, "will that be safe, Lance? Supposing that any one should hear and recognize the names, what then?"

"There is no fear. Nothing can ever be done without risk; but there is no risk there – at least, none that I fear to run. I guarantee that not one person in that church hears those names clearly. Then you will see that I have arranged every detail. Then, when the three weeks have expired, we will meet there some fine morning and be married. I have a friend who will come with me as a witness. After that I propose that we go to London, and there I shall introduce you to my father first; then we will go down to Cawdor to my mother. Do you like the plan, Leone?"

"I should like it much better if they could know of it beforehand," she replied, gravely.

His face grew grave as her own.

"That cannot be," he replied. "You see, Leone, I am not of age; I shall not be twenty-one until September: and if my parents knew of it, they have power to forbid the marriage, and we could not be married; but done without their knowledge, they are of course powerless."

"I do not like it," she said, with a shudder; "I would rather all was open and sincere."

"It cannot be. Why, Leone, where is your reason? If even your uncle knew, he would interfere to prevent it. In his slow, stolid, honest mind he would think such a marriage quite wrong, you may be sure; he would talk about caste, and position, and all kinds of nonsense. We must keep our secret to ourselves, my darling, if we wish to be married at all. Surely, Leone, you love me enough to sacrifice your wishes to me on this point?"

The beautiful face was raised to his.

"I love you well enough to die for you, and far too well to bring trouble on you, Lance."

"My darling, there is only one thing that can bring trouble on me, and that would be to lose you; that would kill me. You hear me, Leone, it would not make me grow thin and pale, after the fashion of rejected lovers, but it would kill me. Do not ask me to leave you an hour longer than I need. Ah, my love, yield: do not grieve me with a hundred obstacles – not even with one. Yield, and say that you will agree to my plan."

There was no resisting the pleading of the handsome young face, the loving eyes, the tender words, the passionate kisses; she could not resist them; it was so sweet to be loved so well.

"You must keep our secret from that honest, stolid, good uncle of yours," said Lord Chandos, "or he will think himself bound to call and tell Dr. Hervey. You promise me, then, Leone, my love, to do what I ask, and to be my own beloved wife, when the three weeks are over?"

"Yes, I promise, Lance," she replied.

Her voice was grave and sweet, her beautiful face had on it the light of a beautiful and noble love.

"Then kiss me, as the children say, of your own accord, and let that kiss be our betrothal."

She raised her lips to his for the first time and kissed him.

"That is our betrothal," he said; "now nothing can part us. Leone, I waited for your promise to give you this."

He opened a small jewel-case, and took from it a diamond ring.

"This is what ladies call an engagement-ring," he said; "let me put it on your finger."

She shrank back.

"Lance," she said, "do you remember the words of the song,

"'A ring in pledge he gave her,
And vows of love he spoke.'

How strange that by this stream you should offer me a ring!"

"You seem to think there is a fatality in the water, Leone," he said, quietly.

"I have an idea that I cannot express, but it seems to me that story is told in the falling water."

"If the water tells of a golden bright life, all happiness, with the most devoted and loving of husbands, then it may tell you as much as it likes. Let me put the ring on your finger, Leone."

She held out her hand – such a beautiful hand, with a soft, pink palm and tapering fingers. As he went to place the ring on her finger, it fell from his hand into the water below, and Leone uttered a low cry.

"It is not lost," he said; "it has not fallen into the stream, it is here."

Looking down, she saw the flash of the diamonds in the little pool that lay between two stones, Lord Chandos wiped it and dried it.

"You will prize it all the more because it has been dipped in your favorite stream," he said.

"Give me your hand again, Leone; we shall have better fortune this time."

He placed the ring securely on her finger, then kissed the white hand.

"How angry you were with me the first time I kissed your hand," he said; "and now I have all your heart. There will be neither broken vows nor a broken ring for us, Leone, no matter what the water sings or says."

"I hope not," says the girl, brightly.

"I shall take possession of my lodgings at Oheton to-morrow," he said. "I shall have to spend some little time there; but you must promise that I shall see you every evening, Leone. Will you find your way to the mill-wheel? When we are married, I shall try to buy the mill, the stream, and the land all round it; it will be a sacred spot to me. In three weeks, Leone, you will be my wife."

"Yes," she replied, "in three weeks."

The wind fell, the ripple of the green leaves ceased, the birds had sung themselves to sleep, only the water ran laughingly on.

"Lance," cried the girl, suddenly, "do you know what the water says – can you hear it?"

"No," he replied, with a laugh; "I have not such a vivid fancy as you. What does it say?"

"Nothing but sorrow, nothing but sorrow," she chanted.

"I cannot hear that; if it says anything at all, it is nothing but love, nothing but love."

And then, as the shades of night were coming on, he saw her safely home.

That same evening Lord Chandos and Sir Frank Euston talked long together.

"Of course," said Sir Frank, "if you put me on my honor, I cannot speak, but I beg of you to stop and think."

Lord Chandos laughed; his handsome face was flushed and eager.

"The man who hesitates is lost," he said. "All the thinking in the world cannot alter matters, nor make me love my darling less."

"There is an old proverb I should like to recommend to you," said Sir Frank Euston; "it is this – a young man married is a young man marred."

"I am quite as willing to be marred as to be married," said the young lord, "and married I will be if all the powers on earth conspire against me."

"I know how useless all arguments are," said his friend, "when a man determines to be foolish; but do think for one moment of the terrible disappointment to your parents."

"I do not see it; they have no right to be disappointed; my father married to please himself, why should I not do the same?"

"You are outraging all the laws of your class," said Sir Frank. "However beautiful a farmer's niece may be, we cannot suppose even a miracle could fit her to take the place of the Countess of Lanswell."

A hot flush came over the young lord's face; a strange quiet came into his voice.

"We will discuss what you like, Frank, but you must not touch the young lady's name, we will leave that out of the question."

"You have asked me to be the witness of your marriage," said Sir Frank, "and that entitles me to speak my mind. I do speak it, frankly, honestly, plainly, as I should thank God for any friend to speak to a brother of my own if he felt inclined to make a simpleton of himself."

"I call myself a sensible man to marry for love, not a simpleton," said Lord Chandos grandly.

"My dear Lance," said his friend, "you make just this one mistake; you are not a man at all, you are a boy."

He stopped suddenly, for the young lord looked at him with a defiant, fierce face.

"You must not say that again, Frank, or we shall be friends no longer."

"I do not want to offend you, Lance; but you are really too young to think of marriage. Your tastes are not formed yet; that which pleases you now you will dislike in six or ten years' time. I assure you that if you marry this farmer's niece now, in ten years' time you will repent it in sackcloth and ashes. She is not fit, either by manner, education, or anything else, to be your mother's daughter, and you know it; you know that when the glamour of her beauty is over you will wonder at your own madness and folly. Be warned in time."

"You may as well reason with a madman as a man in love," said the young lordling, "and I am in love."

"And you are mad," said Sir Frank, quietly; "one day you will know how mad."

Lord Chandos laughed.

"There is method in my madness. Come, Frank, we have been such friends I would do anything you asked me."

"I should never ask you to do anything so foolish, Lance; I wish that I had not given my word of honor to keep your secret; I am quite sure that I ought to send word to the earl and countess at once; I cannot, as I have promised not to do so, but I regret it."

"My dear Frank, nothing in the world would stop me; if anything were done to prevent my marriage now, I would simply await another and more favorable opportunity; my mind is made up. I love the girl with all my heart, and she, no other, shall be my wife. If you refuse to act for me, well and good; I shall find some one else."

"If you would but be reasonable, Lance," said his friend.

"I am not reasonable. When did you ever see reason and love go hand in hand together?"

"They should do so always, and do, when the love is worth having."

"Now, Frank, I have listened patiently; I have heard all that you have had to say; I have weighed every argument, and I remain unconvinced. You have but to say whether you will do this to oblige me or not."

"If I do it, remember, it is under protest, Lance."

"Never mind what it is under, if you only promise."

"I promise, to save you from greater risk, but I do it against my will, my reason, my good sense, my conscience, and everything else."

Lord Chandos laughed aloud.

"You will forget everything of that kind," he said, "when you see Leone."

And the two friends parted, mutually dissatisfied.

CHAPTER VIII. THE PROPHECY

"A very impatient young man," said the good old vicar. "No man in his senses would want to be married before ten in the morning. I call it unchristian."

Good old Mr. Barnes had been roused from his early slumbers by the announcement that the young man had come to be married.

Married, while the early morning sun was shining, and the birds singing their morning hymn.

He was almost blind, this good old vicar, who had lived so long at Oheton. He was very deaf, and could hardly hear, but then he did not require very keen sight or hearing at Oheton; there was never more than one marriage in a year, and funerals were very rare; but to be called before nine in the morning to perform the marriage ceremony was something unheard of. He had duly announced the bans, and no one had taken the least notice of them; but to come so early, it was positively cruel.

Others had risen early that morning. Leone had not slept well, for this July morning, which was to bring such mingled joy and sorrow to others, was a day of deepest emotion to her.

Her love-dream was to be realized. She was to marry the ardent young lover who swore that he would not live without her.

She had thought more of her love than of the worldly advantages it would bring her. She had not thought much of those until they stood, on the evening before their wedding-day, once more by the mill-stream. It was bright moonlight, for the smiling summer day was dead. It was their farewell to the beautiful spot they both loved.

"I am so glad," said Lord Chandos, "that we can say good-bye to it by the light of the moon. I wonder, Leone, when we shall see the mill-stream again? I have a fancy that the pretty water has helped me in my wooing."

As they sat there the wind rose and stirred the branches of the alder-trees. In some way the great wavy masses of dark hair became unfastened, and fell like a thick soft veil over Leone's shoulders. Lord Chandos touched it caressingly with his hand.

"What beautiful hair, Leone – how thick and soft; how beautiful those wavy lines are – what makes them?"

"A turn of Dame Nature's fingers," she replied, laughingly.

"I should like to see diamonds shining in these coils of hair," he said. "Leone, one of the first things we must do to-morrow when we reach London, is to buy a very handsome traveling-dress. I have written to-day to my father to ask him to meet us at Dunmore House."

She repeated the words.

"Where is Dunmore House?" she asked.

"I forgot," he said, "that all places so familiar to me are strange to you. One of my father's titles is Baron Dunmore, and his London residence is called Dunmore House. We shall meet him there to-morrow, and then you will be my wife."

For the first time she realized what an immense difference there was in their positions. She glanced at him in sudden fear.

"Lance," she said, "shall I seem very much out of place in your home, and among your friends?"

"My darling, you would grace any home," he replied; "mine has had no fairer mistress in all the generations it has stood."

"I am half frightened," she said, gently.

"You need not be, sweet. Before this time next year all London will know and admire the beautiful Lady Chandos."

"It seems a long leap to take in life," she said, "from being Farmer Noel's niece to bear the name of Lady Chandos."

"You will grace the name, Leone," he replied. "I shall be the proudest man in England – I shall have the most beautiful wife in England. This is our last separation, our last parting; after this, we need never part."

He stooped down and caught some of the running water in his hand.

"A libation," he said, as he poured it back again. "I feel as though I were losing a friend when I leave the mill-stream."

Loving and loved, no thought came to them there of how they should see the mill-stream again.

"Leone, Lady Chandos." More than once that evening she said those words to herself. It was after eight when she came in, and the farmer had long finished his supper; he sat thinking over his pipe.

"You are late, my lady lass," he said; "sit down and talk to me before I go to rest."

Obediently enough, she sat down while he told her the history of his visits to the different markets. She heard, but did not take in the sense of one single word he uttered. She was saying to herself over and over again, that by this time to-morrow she should be Lady Chandos. Her happiness would have been complete if she could have told her uncle. He had been so kind to her. They were opposite as light and darkness, they had not one idea in common, yet he had been good to her and she loved him. She longed to tell him of her coming happiness and grandeur, but she did not dare to break her word.

Robert Noel looked up in wonder. There was his beautiful niece kneeling at his feet, her eyes dim with tears.

"Uncle," she was saying, "look at me, listen to me. I want to thank you. I want you always to remember that on this night I knelt at your feet and thanked you with a grateful heart for all you have ever done for me."

"Why, my lady lass," he replied, "you have always been to me as a child of my own," he replied.

"A tiresome child," she said, half laughing, half crying. "See. I take this dear, brown hand, so hard with work, and I kiss it, uncle, and thank you from my heart."

He could not recover himself, so to speak. He looked at her in blank, wordless amazement.

"In the years to come," she continued, "when you think of me, you must say to yourself, that, no matter what I did, I loved you."

"No matter what you did you loved me," he repeated. "Yes, I shall remember that."

She kissed the toil-worn face, leaving him so entirely bewildered that the only fear was lest he might sit up all night trying to forget it.

Then she went to her room, but not to sleep – her heart beat, every pulse thrilled. This was to be the last night in her old home – the last of her girlish life; to-morrow she would be Lady Chandos – wife of the young lover whom she loved with all her heart and soul.

The birds woke her with their song, it was their wedding-day. She would not see Robert Noel again; he took his breakfast before six and went off to the fields again. She had but to dress herself and go to the station. Oheton was some three miles from the station, but on a summer's morning that was a trifle.

They were all three there at last – Sir Frank looking decidedly vexed and cross, Lord Chandos happy as the day was long, and Leone beautiful as a picture.

"Look," said the young lordling to his friend, "have I no excuse?"

Sir Frank looked long and earnestly at the beautiful southern face.

"Yes," he replied; "so far as beauty and grace can form an excuse, you have one; but, Lance, if I loved that girl a thousand times better than my life, I should not marry her."

"Why?" asked Lord Chandos, with a laugh.

"Because she has a tragedy in her life. She could not be happy. She will neither have a happy life nor a happy death."

"My dear Frank, do not prophesy such evil on our wedding-day."

"I do not mean to prophesy, I say what I think; it is a beautiful face, full of poetry and passion, but it is also full of power and unrest."

"You shall not look at her again if you say such things," cried Lord Chandos.

And then the good vicar, still distressed at being aroused so early, came to the church. Had it been less pitiful and pathetic, it would have been most comical, the number of times the old vicar dropped his book, forgot the names, the appalling mistakes he made, the nervous hesitation of his manner. Sometimes Lord Chandos felt inclined to say hard, hot words; again, he could not repress a smile. But at length, after trembling and hesitating, the vicar gave the final benediction, and pronounced them man and wife.

In the vestry, when the names were signed, some ray of light seemed to dawn on the old vicar.

"Chandos," he said, "that is not a common name about here."

"Is it not?" said the young lord; "it seems common enough to me."

"Chandos," repeated the minister, "where have I heard that name!"

"I have heard it so often that I am tired of it," said the young husband.

And then it was all over.

"Thank God to be out in the sunlight," he cried, as he stood, with his beautiful wife, in the churchyard. "Thank God it is all over, and I can call my love my wife. I thought that service would never end. Frank, have you no good wishes for my wife?"

Sir Frank went to Leone.

"I wish you joy," he said; "I wish you all happiness – but –"

And then he played nervously with the hat he held in his hand.

"But," she said with a bright smile, "you do not think I shall get it?"

Sir Frank made no answer; he did not think she would be happy, but she had chosen her own way; he had said all he could. Perhaps his eyes were clearer than others, for he could read a tragedy in her face. Then Sir Frank left them, having performed his part with a very ill grace.

"Leone, have you said good-bye to your uncle?" asked Lord Chandos.

"I left a little note to be given him when he returns home this evening. How he will miss me."

"And how fortunate I am to have you, my darling; there is no one in the wide world so happy. We will drive over to Rashleigh Station. I do not care who sees me now, no one can part us. Dr. Hervey thinks I went home to London this morning, but I won a wife before starting, did I not, Leone, my beautiful love? You are Lady Chandos now. What are you thinking of, my darling?"

"I was wondering, Lance, if there was anything in our marriage that could possibly invalidate it and make it illegal?"

"No," he replied, "I have been too careful of you, Leone, for that. You are my wife before God and man. Nothing shall take you from me but death."

"But death," she repeated slowly.

And in after years they both remembered the words.

CHAPTER IX.

A MYSTERIOUS TELEGRAM

Cawdor took rank among the most stately homes of England: it had been originally one of the grand Saxon strongholds, one, too, which the Normans had found hard to conquer.

As time wore on the round towers and the keep fell into ruins – picturesque and beautiful ruins, round which the green ivy hung in luxuriant profusion; then the ruins were left standing.

Little by little the new place was built, not by any particular design; wing after wing, story after story, until it became one of the most picturesque and most magnificent homes in England. Cawdor it was called; neither court, hall nor park, simply Cawdor; and there were very few people in England who did not know Cawdor. There was no book of engravings that had not a view of Cawdor for its first and greatest attraction; there was no exhibition of pictures in which one did not see ruins of Cawdor. It had in itself every attribute of beauty, the ivy-mantled ruins, the keep, from which one could see into five different counties, the moat, now overgrown with trees; the old-fashioned draw-bridge which contrasted so beautifully with the grand modern entrance, worthy of a Venetian palace; the winding river, the grand chain of hills, and in the far distance the blue waters of the Channel.

There could not have been a more beautiful or picturesque spot on earth than Cawdor. It had belonged to the Lanswell family for many generations. The Lanswells were a wealthy race – they owned not only all the land surrounding the fair domain of Cawdor, but nearly the whole of the town of Dunmore. The Earl of Lanswell was also Baron of Raleigh, and Raleigh Hall, in Staffordshire, was a very grand estate. In one part of it an immense coal mine had been discovered, which made Lord Lanswell one of the wealthiest men of the day.

Cawdor, Raleigh Hall, and Dunmore House, three of the finest residences in England, together with a rent-roll counted by hundreds of thousands, should have made the earl a happy man. He married a wealthy heiress in accordance with the old proverb that "Like seeks like." His wife, Lucia, Countess of Lanswell, was one of the proudest peeresses in England; she was unimpeachable in every relation of life, and had little pity for those who were not; she had never known sorrow, temptation, doubt, or anything else; she had lived in an atmosphere of perfect content and golden ease; she had the grandest mansion, the finest diamonds, the finest horses in London; she had the most indulgent husband, the handsomest son, and the prettiest daughter; she did not know the word want in any shape, she had not even suffered from the crumpled rose-leaf. The nearest approach to trouble of any kind that she had known was that her son, Lord Chandos, had failed in one of his examinations. He asked that he might go into the country for some months to read, and permission was most cheerfully given to him. With her daughter, Lady Imogene Chandos, the countess had never had and never expected to have any trouble; she was one of the fairest, sweetest, and most gentle of girls; she was docile and obedient; she had never in her life given the least trouble to any one.

Lord Lanswell was walking up and down one of the broad terraces at Cawdor one fine morning in July, when one of the servants brought to him a telegram. He opened it hastily, it was from his son, Lord Chandos:

"Dearest Father, – Will you run up to town, and meet me at Dunmore House this evening? I have something very important to tell you. Not one word to mother yet."

Lord Lanswell stood still to think with the telegram in his hand.

"What can be the matter now?" he said to himself; "that boy will give me trouble. He has done something now that he will not let my lady know."

He had a dull, heavy presentiment that the boy who should have been the pride and delight of his life would be a drawback and a torment.

"I must go," said the earl to himself, "I must make some excuse to satisfy my lady."

It was typical of Lady Lanswell that her husband seldom spoke of her as my wife, the children more seldom still as "my mother;" every one alike called her "my lady." She might have been the only peeress in England, so entirely did every one agree in giving her that title. "My lady" was pleased, meant sunshine at Cawdor; "my lady" was angry, meant gloom. She regulated the moral and mental atmosphere of the house with a smile or a frown.

Lord Lanswell knew that he dare not show the telegram to Lady Lanswell; she would have started off at once for Dunmore House, and there would have been war. He must deceive her. He carefully destroyed the telegram, in some queer fashion which he did not own even to himself he had a kind of sympathy with his son.

He had been wild in his youth and made allowances for the same in others. His worst thought now was that his handsome young heir, with the frank blue eyes and sunny hair, had been gambling or betting.

"A few thousand pounds would set him straight," he thought, "and after all, one must not be too hard on the follies of youth."

No need to tell my lady; she looked on these exploits with a keen, cold eye. He went to the drawing-room, where my lady sat looking regally beautiful in black velvet and point lace.

The countess of Lanswell was considered one of the handsomest women in England. She had married very young, and her beauty was still so well preserved that she took her place with the beauties of the day. Husband and children both felt in awe of the beautiful woman, with her queenly grace and bearing.

"Lucia," said the earl, "I thought of running up to town this afternoon. I shall return to-morrow."

"Indeed," said my lady, slowly. "Why this sudden resolution, Ross?"

"There is some little business that no one can attend to but myself," he said. "I shall not be long absent."

"Business of what nature?" asked my lady, her fine eyes fixed on his face.

"Why, dear, it is surely not needful for me to explain my business to you? I have none of which you would not approve. I want to call on my bankers – I want to sell some shares. I have several little reasons for running up to town."

"You remember, of course, that the Beauvoirs dine here to-day?" said my lady.

"Yes, I have not forgotten, but with your usual tact you can apologize for me, Lucia."

The compliment pleased her.

"Certainly, I can, if your absence is really needful, Ross," said my lady.

"It is needful, I assure you. I can tell you all I have done when I return; just now I must hurry off, or I shall not catch the train."

As the earl quitted Cawdor, he regretted deeply that his son should have complicated the situation by enforcing silence as regarded his mother.

He pondered a great deal on what he should say when he returned – above all, if the boy's trouble was, as he imagined, the loss of money.

"I must not let his mother know," thought the earl. "Boys are boys; she would think he was lost altogether if she knew that he had betting and gambling debts. Whatever he owes, no matter what it is, I will give him a check for it, and make him promise me that it shall be the last time."

He never thought of any other danger; that his son had fallen in love or wanted to marry never occurred to him. He was glad when he reached Dunmore House; the old housekeeper met him in the hall.

"I have dinner ready, my lord," she said. "Lord Chandos told me you were coming."

He looked round expectantly.

"Is not Lord Chandos here?" he asked.

It occurred to him that the housekeeper looked troubled and distressed.

"No," she replied, "he is not staying here – they are staying in the Queen's Hotel, in Piccadilly."

"They," he cried, "whom do you mean by they? Has Lord Chandos friends with him?"

The woman's face grew pale. She shrunk perceptibly from the keen, gray eyes.

"I understood his lordship that he was not alone," she replied. "I may have made a mistake. I understood him also that he should be with you by eight this evening, when you had finished dinner."

"Why could he not dine with me?" he thought. "Sends a telegram for me, and then leaves me to dine alone. It is not like Lance."

But thinking over it would not solve the mystery; the earl went to his room and dressed for dinner. He had ordered a bottle of his favorite Madeira, of which wonderful tales were told.

Then he sat thinking about his son, and his heart softened toward him. He thought of the handsome, curly-headed young boy whose grand spirit no one but my lady could subdue. He laughed aloud as he remembered the struggles between himself and his heir – they had always ended in his defeat; but when my lady came on the scene it was quite another thing, the defeat was on the other side then, and my Lord Chandos was usually carried off defeated and conquered.

He thought of the handsome stripling who used to wander about the grounds at Cawdor, trying to conceal from my lady the fact that he smoked cigars. He did not fear his father and smoked boldly before him, but at the first sound of my lady's rustling silk he flew rather than ran. Lord Lanswell laughed aloud as he thought of it all.

"He is just as frightened at my lady now," he said to himself. "I cannot help feeling touched and flattered that he has sent for me in his trouble. I will help him and my lady shall never know."

His heart warmed to his son and heir – no one knew how dearly he loved him, nor how completely his life was wrapped up in him. Then he heard a cab drive up to the door. Surely that must be Lance.

He listened in impatient suspense – he heard whispering in the outer hall, as though some consultation were being held.

"What in the world is the boy making a mystery over?" he asked himself.

Then he started from his chair in unutterable amazement.

Before him stood Lance, Lord Chandos, holding the hands of the most beautiful girl he had ever seen in his life.

CHAPTER X.

A SHOCKED FATHER

"I am quite sure of one thing," Lord Chandos had said, as they drew near London, "and that is, Leone – if my father sees you before my mother has time to interfere, it will be all right. He can resist anything but a pretty face – that always conquers him."

"I wish," said Leone, with a sigh, "that I were less proud. Do you know, Lance, that I cannot endure to hear you speak as though I were to be received as a great favor. I wonder why I am so proud? I am a farmer's niece, and you are the son of a powerful earl, yet I – please do not be offended; I cannot help it – I feel quite as good as you."

He laughed aloud. There was nothing he enjoyed better than this proud frankness of hers, which would never yield to or worship rank or title.

"I am glad to hear it, Leone," he replied. "For my own part, I think you very much better than myself. I have no fear, if my father sees you first, and that is why I have telegraphed to him to meet us at Dunmore House."

"But," she insisted, "suppose that he does not like me – what shall we do then?"

"Why," he replied, "the right and proper thing for me to do then will be to try to love you, if possible, even better than I do now. Leone, the first thing we must do is to drive to one of the court milliners; no matter what follows, your dress must be attended to at once – first impressions are everything. You look royally beautiful in all that you wear, but I would much rather that my father saw you in a proper costume. Suppose we drive to a milliner's first, and choose a handsome dress, and all things suitable, then we can go to the Queen's Hotel; the trunks can be sent after us. We can dine there; and when you have dressed *a la* Lady Chandos, we will go to Dunmore House, and carry everything before us."

He did as he had said. They drove first to Madame Caroline's. Lord Chandos was accustomed to the princely style of doing things. He sent for madame, who looked up in wonder at his fair young face.

"This is my wife," he said, "Lady Chandos. We have been in the country and she wants everything new, in your best style."

It seemed to him hours had passed when madame reappeared. Certainly he hardly knew the superbly beautiful girl with her. Was it possible that after all the poets had said about "beauty unadorned" that dress made such a difference? It had changed his beautiful Leone into a beautiful empress. Madame looked at him for approval.

"I hope your lordship is satisfied," she said; with the usual quickness of her nation, she had detected the fact that this had been a runaway marriage.

"I am more than satisfied," he replied.

Before him stood a tall, slender girl, whose superb figure was seen to advantage in one of Worth's most fashionable dresses – trailing silk and rich velvet, so skillfully intermixed with the most exquisite taste; a lace bonnet that seemed to crown the rippling hair; pearl-gray gloves that might have grown on the white hands. Her dress was simply perfect; it was at once elegant and ladylike, rich and costly.

"I shall not be afraid to face my father now," he said, "I have a talisman."

Yet his fair young face grew paler as they reached Dunmore House. It was a terrible risk, and he knew it – a terrible ordeal. He realized what he had done when the housekeeper told him the earl awaited him in the dining-room. A decided sensation of nervousness came over him, and he looked at the fresh, proud, glowing beauty of his young wife to reassure himself. She was perfect, he felt that, and he was satisfied.

"Give me your hand, Leone," he said, and the touch of that little hand gave him new courage. He went in leading her, and the earl sprung from his seat in startling amaze. Lord Chandos went boldly up to him.

"Father," he said, "allow me to introduce to you my wife, Leone, Lady Chandos."

The earl gave a terrified glance at the beautiful southern face, but made no answer.

"I have to ask your forgiveness," continued the young lordling, "for having married without your consent; but I knew, under the circumstances, it was useless to ask it, so I married without."

Still the same terrified look and utter silence.

"Father," cried Lord Chandos, "why do you not welcome my young wife home?"

Then Lord Lanswell tried to smile – a dreadful, ghastly smile.

"My dear boy," he said, "you are jesting; I am quite sure you are jesting. It cannot be real; you would not be so cruel!"

"Father," repeated the young lord, in an imperative voice, "will you bid my wife welcome home?"

"No," said the earl stoutly, "I will not. The young lady will excuse me if I decline to bid her welcome to a home that can never be hers."

"Father," cried the young man, reproachfully, "I did not expect this from you."

"I do not understand what else you could expect," cried the earl, angrily. "Do you mean to tell me that it is true that this person is your wife?"

"My dear and honored wife," replied the young man.

"Do you mean to tell me that you have actually married this lady, Lance – really married her?"

"I have, indeed, father, and it is about the best action of my life," said Lord Chandos.

"How do you intend to face my lady?" asked the earl, with the voice and manner of one who proposes a difficulty not to be solved.

"I thought you would help us, father; at least, speak to my wife."

The earl looked at the beautiful, distressed face.

"I am very sorry," he said, "sorry for you, Lance, and the lady, but I cannot receive her as your wife."

"She is my wife, whether you receive her or not," said Lord Chandos. "Leone, how can I apologize to you? I never expected that my father would receive you in this fashion. Father, look at her; think how young, how beautiful she is; you cannot be unkind to her."

"I have no wish to be unkind," said the earl, "but I cannot receive her as your wife."

Then, seeing the color fade from her face, he hastened to find her a chair, and poured out a glass of wine for her; he turned with a stern face to his son.

"What have you been doing?" he cried. "While your mother and I thought you were working hard to make up for lost time, what have you been doing?"

"I have been working very hard," he replied, "and my work will bring forth good fruit; but, father, I have found leisure for love as well."

"So it seems," said the earl, dryly; "perhaps you will tell me who this lady is, and why she comes home with you?"

"My wife; her name was Leone Noel; she is now Lady Chandos."

For the first time Leone spoke.

"I am a farmer's niece, my lord," she said, simply.

Her voice had a ring of music in it so sweet that it struck the earl with wonder.

"A farmer's niece," he replied. "You will forgive me for saying that a farmer's niece can be no fitting wife for my son."

"I love him, my lord, very dearly, and I will try hard to be all that he can wish me to be."

"Bravely spoken; but it is quite in vain; my lady would never hear of such a thing – I dare not – I cannot sanction it, even by a word, my lady would never forgive me. Can you tell me when this rash action was accomplished?"

"This is our wedding-day, father," cried Lord Chandos. "Only think of it, our wedding-day, and you receive us like this. How cruel and cold."

"Nay, I am neither," said the earl; "it is rather you, Lance, who do not seem to realize what you have done. You seem to think you belong to yourself; you are mistaken; a man in your position belongs to his country, his race, to his family, not to himself; that view of the question, probably, did not strike you."

"No," replied Lord Chandos, "it certainly did not; but, father, if I have done wrong, forgive me."

"I do forgive you, my dear boy, freely; young men will be foolish – I forgive you; but do not ask me to sanction your marriage or receive your wife. I cannot do it."

"Then, of what use is your forgiveness? Oh, father, I did not expect this from you; you have always been so kind to me. I had fancied difficulties with my mother, but none with you."

"My dear Lance, we had better send for my lady; she is really, as you know, the dominant spirit of our family. She will decide on what is to be done."

"I insist on my wife being treated with due respect," raged the young lord.

"My dear Lance, you must do as you will; I refuse to recognize this lady in any way. Will you tell me when and where you were married?"

"Certainly: this morning, by the Reverend Mr. Barnes, at the Church of St. Barnabas, in Oheton, a little village twenty miles from Rashleigh. The marriage was all *en regle*; we had the bans published and witnesses present."

"You took great pains to be exact, and the lady, you tell me, is a farmer's niece."

"My uncle is Farmer Robert Noel; he has a farm at Rashleigh," said Leone, "and in his way is an honest, loyal, honorable man."

The earl could not help feeling the sweet, soft music of that voice; it touched his heart.

"I believe you," he said, "but it is a sad thing Farmer Noel did not take more care of his niece. I am sorry it has happened; I can do nothing to help you; my lady must manage it all."

"But, father," pleaded the young man, "it was on you I relied; it was to your efforts I trusted. Be my friend; if you will receive my wife here and acknowledge her, no one else can say a word."

"My dear boy, only yesterday your mother and I were speaking of something on which the whole desire of her heart was fixed; remembering that conversation I tell you quite frankly that I dare not do what you ask me; your mother would never speak to me again."

"Then, Leone, darling, we will go; Heaven forbid that we should remain where we are not welcome. Father," he cried, in sudden emotion, "have you not one kind word, not one blessing for me, on my wedding-day?"

"I refuse to believe that it is your wedding-day, Lance. When that day does come, you shall have both kind words and blessings from me."

CHAPTER XI.

THE LAWYER'S STATEMENT

Lady Lanswell stood in the library at Dunmore House, her handsome face flushed with irritation and annoyance, her fine eyes flashing fire. She looked like one born to command; her tall, stately figure bore no signs of age; her traveling dress of rich silk swept the ground in graceful folds. She had not removed her mantle of rich lace; it hung from her shoulders still; she had removed her bonnet and gloves. With one jeweled hand resting on the table, she stood, the picture of indignation and anger.

Lord Lanswell had sent a telegram at once, when his son left him, begging her to come at once, as Lance had something important to tell her.

My lady lost no time; she was far more quick and keen of judgment than the earl. She never thought of gambling or betting, her thoughts all went to love. It was something about a girl, she said to herself; but she should stand no nonsense. Lance must remember what was due to his family. If he had made any such mistake as that of falling in love with one beneath him, then he must rectify the mistake as quickly as possible; there could be no *mesalliance* in a family like theirs. As for any promise of marriage, if he had been so foolish as to make one he must break it. A sum of money would doubtless have to be expended over the matter, then it would be all right.

So thought my lady, and as the express drew near London she promised herself that all would be well. Her spirits rose, her fears abated; no son of hers would ever make a mistake so utterly absurd. There was something of scorn in my lady's face as she entered Dunmore House. The earl met her in the entrance hall.

"I have lost no time, as you see," she said. "What is all this nonsense, Ross?"

He did not answer until they stood together in the library, with the door closed, and then she repeated the words. Something in her husband's face dismayed her.

"Speak, Ross; I dislike suspense. Tell me at once; what has the boy done?"

"He is married," said the earl, solemnly.

"Great Heaven!" cried my lady. "Married! You cannot mean it. Married – how – whom – when?"

"You will be dreadfully distressed," he began, slowly.

My lady stamped her foot.

"I can bear distress better than suspense. Tell me quickly, Ross, has he disgraced himself?"

"I am afraid so," was the brief reply.

"And I loved him so – I trusted him so; it is impossible; tell me, Ross."

"He has married a farmer's niece. The girl is beautiful. I have seen no one so beautiful; she seems to be well educated and refined. Her uncle has a farm at Rashleigh."

"A farmer's niece," cried my lady; "you cannot possibly mean it. There must be some mistake – the boy has been playing a practical joke on you."

"It is no joke; I only wish it were. Lance gave me the details. He was married yesterday morning by the Reverend Mr. Barnes, at the Church of St. Barnabas, at Oheton, a village somewhere near Rashleigh."

"Married – really and actually married," cried my lady. "I will not believe it."

"Unhappily, it is true. He expected, I think, to make his home here; he had no idea of leaving Dunmore House; but I told him that I could not receive him or her."

"Her! You do not mean to say that he had the audacity to bring her here, Ross?"

"Yes, they came together last night; but I would not receive her. I told them plainly that you must settle the matter, as I could not."

"I should think not," said my lady, with emphasis.

"I must own, though," continued the earl, "that I was rather sorry for Lance; he had trusted entirely to my good offices and seemed to think it very cruel of me to refuse to plead for him."

"And the girl," said my lady, "what of her?"

"You will think I am weak and foolish, without doubt," he said, "but the girl distressed me even more than Lance. She is beautiful enough to arouse the admiration of the world; and she spoke so well for him."

"A farmer's niece – an underbred, forward, designing, vulgar country girl – to be Countess of Lanswell," cried my lady, in horror.

"Nay," said the earl, "she is a farmer's niece, it is true, but she is not vulgar."

"It is not possible that she can be presentable," said my lady. "We must move heaven and earth to set the marriage aside."

"I had not thought of that," said the earl, simply.

Then my lady took the lace mantilla from her shoulders, and sat down at the writing-table.

"I will send for Mr. Sewell," she said. "If any one can give us good advice, he can."

Mr. Sewell was known as one of the finest, keenest, and cleverest lawyers in England; he had been for more than twenty years agent for the Lanswells of Cawdor. He knew every detail of their history, every event that happened; and the proud countess liked him, because he was thoroughly conservative in all his opinions. She sent for him now as a last resource; the carriage was sent to his office, so that he might lose no time. In less than an hour the brisk, energetic lawyer stood before the distressed parents, listening gravely to the story of the young heir's marriage.

"Have you seen the girl?" he asked.

"Yes, I have seen her," said the earl.

"Is she presentable?" he inquired. "Would any degree of training enable her to take her rank – " Lady Lanswell interrupted him.

"The question need never be asked," she said, proudly. "I refuse ever to see her, or acknowledge her. I insist on the marriage being set aside."

"One has to be careful, my lady," said Mr. Sewell.

"I see no need for any great care," she retorted. "My son has not studied us; we shall not study him. I would rather the entail were destroyed, and the property go to one of Charles Seyton's sons, than my son share it with a low-born wife."

My lady's face was inflexible. The earl and the lawyer saw that she was resolved – that she would never give in, never yield, no matter what appeal was made to her.

They both knew that more words were useless. My lady's mind was made up, and they might as well fight the winds and the waves. Lord Lanswell was more inclined to pity and to temporize. He was sorry for his son, and the beautiful face had made some impression on him; but my lady was inflexible.

"The marriage must be set aside," she repeated.

The earl looked at her gravely.

"Who can set aside a thoroughly legal marriage?" he asked.

"You will find out the way," said my lady, turning to Mr. Sewell.

"I can easily do that, Lady Lanswell; of course it is for you to decide; but there is no doubt but that the marriage can easily be disputed – you must decide. If you think the girl could be trained and taught to behave herself – perhaps the most simple and honorable plan would be to let the matter stand as it is, and do your best for her."

"Never!" cried my lady, proudly. "I would rather that Cawdor were burned to the ground than to have such a person rule over it. It is useless to waste time and words, the marriage must be set aside."

The lawyer looked from one to the other.

"There can be no difficulty whatever in setting the marriage aside," said Mr. Sewell. "In point of fact, I must tell you what I imagined you would have known perfectly well."

My lady looked at him with redoubled interest.

"What is that?" she asked, quickly.

The earl listened with the greatest attention.

"It is simply this, Lady Lanswell, that the marriage is no marriage; Lord Chandos is under age – he cannot marry without your consent; any marriage that he contracts without your consent is illegal and invalid – no marriage at all – the law does not recognize it."

"Is that the English law?" asked Lady Lanswell.

"Yes, the marriage of a minor, like your son, without the consent of his parents, is no marriage; the law utterly ignores it. The remedy lies, therefore, in your own hands."

Husband and wife looked at each other; it was a desperate chance, a desperate remedy. For one moment each thought of the sanctity of the marriage tie, and all that was involved in the breaking of it. Each thought how terribly their only son must suffer if this law was enforced.

Then my lady's face hardened and the earl knew what was to follow.

"It remains for us, then, Mr. Sewell," she said, "to take the needful steps."

"Yes, you must make an appeal to the High Court, and the marriage will be at once set aside," said Mr. Sewell. "It is a terrible thing for the young wife, though."

"She should have had more sense than to have married my son," cried my lady. "I have pity for my son – none for her."

"I think it would be more fair to tell Lord Chandos what you intend doing," said Mr. Sewell. "Not that he could make either resistance or defense – the law is absolute."

"What will the end be?" asked my lady.

"The marriage will be declared null and void; they will be compelled to separate now; but again he has the remedy in his own hand. If he chooses to remain true and constant to her, the very next day after he becomes of age he can remarry her, and then she becomes his lawful wife; if he forgets her the only remedy for her would be money compensation."

"It shall be the business of my life to see that he does forget her," said my lady.

"You can commence proceedings at once," said Mr. Sewell. "You can file your petition to-morrow."

"It will make the whole matter public," hesitated my lady.

"Yes, that is the one drawback. After all it does not matter," said Mr. Sewell, "many young men make simpletons of themselves in the same way. People do not pay much attention."

Lord Lanswell looked at his wife's handsome, inflexible face.

"It is a desperate thing to do, Lucia," he said, "for Lance loves her very dearly."

"It was a desperate action on his part to marry without consulting us," said my lady.

"He will be of age next June," said the earl, "do you think that he will be true to her?"

"No," said the countess, proudly. "I can safely pledge you my word that he will not."

CHAPTER XII.

"THEY WILL NOT FORGIVE ME."

"Thank Heaven," said the countess, "that the matter can be set straight. If there had been no remedy I should have lost my reason over it. The boy must have been mad or blinded, or very probably drawn into it in some disgraceful fashion or other."

My lady was triumphant, her handsome face lighted with satisfaction, but the earl looked grave. The lawyer had taken his leave, and they still remained to discuss matters. Lord Lanswell did not seem so well pleased; he went up to my lady where she was standing.

"Lucia," he began, "do you think that if we succeed in parting these two we shall do quite right?"

"Right," cried my lady. "I shall think it one of the most virtuous actions of my life."

"Well," said the earl, "I am sorry that I cannot quite agree with you. No doubt this marriage is vexatious enough, but whether it is well to obliterate all traces of it, or rather to do away with it altogether, is quite another thing."

"I am the best judge of what is right in this case," said my lady, haughtily; "I will have no interference. The business part of it must be attended to at once."

"At least you will write to Lance and tell him what you intend doing?"

"Yes, I have no objection to that," she replied; "it can make no possible difference to him."

"He may try to make some compromise," said Lord Lanswell, whose heart smote him as he thought of the passionate, beautiful face.

"There can be no compromise; he must give her up at once, and marry some one in his own rank," said the countess. "I will write the letter at once, and I must ask you, Ross, not to be weak. A weak man is the most contemptible object in creation."

"I will try not to be weak, my dear," said the earl, submissively; "but I am concerned for Lance."

"Lance must take his chance," said my lady, too angry to be conscious of the rhyme; "he has done wrong, and he must suffer for it. He will thank Heaven in a year's time from now that I have saved him."

Still Lord Lanswell looked at his wife with a grave expression of doubt.

"You think, then, Lucia, that in a year's time he will have forgotten that poor young wife?"

"I am quite sure of it. Long before I had heard of this foolish affair I had decided in my own mind whom he should marry, and I see no reason for changing my plans."

Lord Lanswell thought with regret and sympathy of the young wife. Could it be possible, he thought, that his son would be so disloyal, so unfaithful as to forget in twelve short months the wife he had risked so much to win? He looked at the countess.

"The matter then lies in a nutshell and depends entirely upon whether Lance continues true to his love or not. If he remains true, your scheme for parting them will have but little effect; if he prove false, why then all will be well, according to your way of thinking."

"We will finish with the subject," she said. "You may make your mind quite easy about it. I guarantee all my knowledge of the world that he will not only have forgotten her in twelve months' time, but that he will be ashamed of having ever fancied himself in love with her."

Lord Lanswell went, in obedience to his wife's command, to assist in the commencement of the proceedings, and as soon as my lady was left alone, she sat down to write to her son. She told him, in the plainest possible words, that his marriage was not only unlawful, but invalid, as he, being minor, could not contract a legal marriage without the consent of his parents. My lady had faith enough in herself to add openly:

"You can, of course, please yourself, as soon as you are of age; you can then remarry the young person without our consent if you will; but my opinion is you will not."

The time which had passed so unpleasantly for the earl and countess was bright and light for the young bride and bridegroom. Leone had shed some bitter tears when they left Dunmore House, but Lord Chandos laughed; he was angry and irritated, but it seemed to him that such a state of things could not last. His father and mother had indulged him in everything – surely they would let him have his way in marriage. He kissed the tears from his young wife's face, and laughed away her fears.

"It will be all right in the end," he said. "My father may hold out for a few days, but he will give way; in the meantime, we must be happy, Leone. We will stay at the Queen's Hotel until they invite us to Cawdor. It will not be long; my mother and father cannot get on without me. We will go to the opera to-night, that will distract your thoughts."

The opera had been but hitherto an empty word to Leone. She had a vague idea that it consisted of singing. After all there was some compensation to be found; her young husband was devoted to her, she was magnificently dressed, and was going in a beautiful closed carriage to the opera.

She uttered no word of surprise, but her whole soul was filled with wonder. The highest festivity and the greatest gayety she had ever witnessed was a choir tea-party. She had a most beautiful voice; in fact, neither herself nor any of those around her knew the value of her voice or appreciated it.

On great occasions the choir were entertained by the rector – once during the summer when they made merry out in the green woods, and once in the winter when they were entertained in the school-room. Leone had thought these parties the acme of grandeur and perfection; now she sat in that brilliant circle and wondered into what world she had fallen.

Before the curtain was raised she was engrossed in that brilliant circle. She had never seen such dresses, such diamonds, such jewels, faces so beautiful, toilets so exquisite; it was all quite new to her. The beautiful and poetic side of it appealed to her. Her beautiful face flushed with delight, her dark eyes were lustrous and radiant.

Lord Chandos, looking round the opera-house, where some of the handsomest women in England were, said to himself that among all these fair and noble faces there was not one so beautiful as Leone's.

She herself was quite unconscious of the admiration she excited; she did not see how the opera-glasses were turned to her face; she could not hear people asking: "Who is that with Lord Chandos? What a beautiful face, what a lovely girl! Who is she?" Lord Chandos saw it, and was not only proud, but flattered by it.

"My mother will yield at once when she sees her," he thought; "she will be pleased that the most beautiful woman in England is my wife."

He made no introductions, though many of his friends bowed to him, with a secret hope that he would ask them into his box. But he had arranged his own plans. His mother – the proud, exclusive, haughty Countess of Lanswell – should be the one to introduce his beautiful wife to the world; that of itself would be a passport for her. So that he was careful not to ask any one into his box, or even to exchange a word with any of the people he knew.

From the time the curtain was drawn up until the opera ended, Leone was in a trance. Quite suddenly she had entered this new and beautiful world of music and art – a world so bright and dazzling that it bewildered her.

Lord Chandos watched her with keen delight – her lustrous eyes, the intense face, the parted lips.

The opera was one of the most beautiful – "Norma" – and the part of Norma was taken by the greatest *prima donna* of her time. Leone's eyes filled with tears as those passionate reproaches were sung; she knew nothing of the language, but the music was full of eloquence for her. She turned suddenly to her husband; her whole soul seemed awake and thrilling with dramatic instinct.

"Lance," she said in a low voice, "I could do that; I do not mean that I could sing so well, but I could feel the jealousy she feels. I could utter those reproaches. Something seems to have awoken in my soul that never lived before; it is all new to me, yet I understand it all; my heart is on fire as I listen."

"And you have enjoyed it?" he said, when the curtain fell on the last grand scene.

She answered him with a low sigh of perfect content.

So it was that to her her wedding-day became the most marked day of her life, for on it she awoke to the knowledge of the world of art and music.

There was nothing for it but to remain at the hotel.

Lord Chandos merely laughed at the notion of his parents holding out against him. He was wonderfully sanguine.

"We shall hear the carriage stop some fine morning," he said, "and they will be here to seek a reconciliation."

He laughed when the waiter gave him my lady's letter; he turned triumphantly to his wife.

"This is from my mother," he said; "I knew she would relent, it is probably to ask us to Cawdor."

But as he read it his face changed; the smile and the triumph died from it. He said no word to Leone, but tore the letter into shreds. She looked on with a wistful face.

"Is it from your mother, Lance?" she asked.

He took her in his arms and kissed her.

"My darling, do not trouble about them; you are all the world to me. They will not forgive me; but it does not matter. I am proud of what I have done. I am quite independent. I shall take a pretty little villa at Richmond, and we shall live there until they come to their senses."

"That will be giving up all the world for me," she said.

"The world will be well lost, Leone. We will go to-morrow and find a pretty little house where we shall be quite happy. Remember one thing always – that my mother will love you when she sees you."

"Then let her see me now, Lance, at once," she cried, eagerly, "if you think so. Why wait? I should be more happy than any one else in the world if you would do that."

"It is too soon yet," he replied; "all will be right in time."

She wished that he had offered to show her his mother's letter; but she did not like to ask what the contents were.

Lord Chandos dare not tell her, besides which he laughed in scorn at the idea. They might threaten as they would; but he felt quite certain there was no power on earth which could set aside his marriage, therefore he should not trouble himself about it. He would go to Richmond and look out for a house there.

CHAPTER XIII. A PERFECTLY HAPPY WOMAN

"They would never dare do it," Lord Chandos repeated to himself with a laugh of contempt. Set his marriage aside. They were mad to think of such a thing.

From time to time strange-looking documents came to him; he thrust them aside without even looking at them. He only laughed at the notion. Part him from Leone. It was not in the power of any one on earth to do it. He never mentioned the matter to Leone at all; it was not worth while to disturb her.

They had been to Richmond, and had found there a villa so beautiful it seemed to have been built for them – a quaint, picturesque, old English house, full of pretty nooks and corners, with large latticed windows, over which roses and jasmine hung in abundance; a smooth, green lawn on which stood a superb cedar-tree; beautiful grounds that reached down to the river. The views from the windows were superb. It was worth anything to stand on that green lawn and watch the sunset on the Thames.

Leone was delighted with it; she had never dreamed of a home so beautiful. Lord Chandos furnished it with the utmost luxury, and there the first few happy months of their life was spent. Lord Chandos did not wish exactly that his marriage should be kept secret, but he did not want it known to the world in general until his mother was willing to introduce and receive his wife.

To Leone that life that opened to her was like a heaven on earth; her husband surrounded her with "kind observances;" he purchased for her a wardrobe that was a marvel of beauty and elegance; he found a French lady's-maid, who understood all the duties of the toilet. What was more, he had the best masters in London to instruct her. Her voice was one of the finest ever heard, her taste for music so great that she was soon proficient.

He taught her himself to ride. There was one thing singular, every master who attended her was aware of a great hidden power within her, they said among each other that she was something wonderful – that the world would hear of her some day. There was an innate sense of power, a grand dramatic instinct, a keen sense of everything beautiful, noble and great. There were times when an electric flash of genius made them marvel.

"It is a thousand pities," said the music-master to himself, "that she has married a nobleman. If she had been dependent on her own exertions, I could have made her one of the finest singers in the world."

Again, the drawing-master said:

"If I had the training of Lady Chandos I would make her the finest artist in England."

None of them had discovered the real secret of her genius, or what was the true fire that every now and then seemed to brighten them all as it flashed over them.

A few weeks completely changed her; she had that keen, quick insight into everything, that wondrous tact and intelligence which make some women seem as though they were magicians.

When she went first to River View, she had some traces of her rustic training. Before six weeks had passed over it had all disappeared. Lord Chandos himself had taught her; her intonation and accent were clear and refined, her words well chosen, her expressions always poetical and full of grace; no one meeting her then could have told that she had spent her life in the rural shades of Rashleigh.

New beauty came to her with this development of mind; new, spiritual, poetical loveliness; and Lord Chandos, looking at his peerless young wife, felt always quite confident that when his mother saw her all would be well – she would be proud of her.

While Leone seemed to have gone straight to heaven, she could not realize that this was the same life she rebelled against with such fierce rebellion. Now the days were not long enough to hold

in them all the happiness that fell to her share. The birds woke her with their singing; the sun with its shining; another beautiful day had dawned for her – a day that was full of beauty and love. They passed like a dream.

She took breakfast always with her husband; perhaps the happiest hour of the day was that. The windows of the pretty breakfast-room looked over a wilderness of flowers; the windows were always open. The soft, sweet summer air came in, parting the long, white curtains, bringing with it the breath of roses and the odor of a hundred flowers.

She looked as fresh and fair as the morning itself. Lord Chandos wondered more and more at her radiant loveliness. Her soul was awake now, and looked out of her dark eyes into the world she found so beautiful.

Then Lord Chandos went up to town for a few hours, while Leone took her different lessons and studied. They met again at lunch, and they spent the afternoon out-of-doors. An ideal life – an idyl in itself. Leone, while she lived, retained a vivid remembrance of those afternoons, of the shade of the deep woods, of the ripple of the river through the green banks, of the valleys where flowers and ferns grew, of the long alleys where the pleasant shade made a perfect paradise. She remembered them – the golden glow, the fragrance, the music of them, remained with her until she died. All the most pleasant times of our lives are dreams.

Then they dined together; and in the evening Lord Chandos took his beautiful young wife to the opera or the play, to concert or lecture.

"As soon as I am of age," he would say, "I shall take you on the Continent; there is no education we get like that we get by traveling one year on the Continent; and you will be at home on every subject, Leone," he would say; and Leone longed for the time to come.

"When I am of age," was his universal cry.

When Leone expressed any anxiety or sorrow over his separation from his parents, he would laugh and answer:

"Never mind, my darling, it will be all right when I am of age. Never mind, darling, you will have my mother asking for the pleasure of knowing you then – the tables will be turned; let the great world once see you, and you will be worshiped for your beauty, your grace, and your talent."

She looked wistfully at him.

"Do they love beauty so much in your world, Lance?" she asked.

"Yes, as a rule, a beautiful face has a wonderful influence. I have known women without a tithe of your beauty, Leone, rise from quite third-rate society to find a place among the most exclusive and noblest people in the land. Your face would win for you, darling, an entrance anywhere."

"The only thing I want my face to do," she said, "is to please your mother."

"And that, when she sees it, it is quite sure to do," replied the lover-husband.

"Lance," said Lady Chandos, "what shall we do if your parents will neither forgive us nor see us?"

"It will be very uncomfortable," said Lord Chandos; "but we shall have to bear it. It will not much matter so far as worldly matters are concerned; when I am of age I shall have a separate and very handsome fortune of my own. My mother will soon want to know you when you become the fashion – as you will, Leone."

So she dismissed the future from her mind. She would not think of it. She had blind reliance, blind confidence in her husband; he seemed so carelessly happy and indifferent she could not think there was anything vitally wrong. She was so unutterably happy, so wonderfully, thoroughly happy. Her life was a poem, the sweetest love-story ever written or sung.

"Why am I so happy?" she would ask herself at times; "why has Heaven given me so much? all I ever asked for – love and happiness?"

She did not know how to be grateful enough.

One morning in autumn, a warm, beautiful morning, when the sun shone on the rich red and brown foliage – they were out together on the fair river – the tide was rising and the boat floated lazily on the stream. Lady Chandos wore a beautiful dress of amber and black that suited her dark, brilliant beauty to perfection. She lay back among the velvet cushions, smiling as her eyes lingered on the sky, the trees, the stream.

"You look very happy, Leone," said Lord Chandos.

"I am very happy," she replied. "I wrote to my uncle yesterday, Lance. I should like to send him a box filled with everything he likes best."

"You shall, if it pleases you, my darling," he answered.

She leaned over the side of the boat watching the water, drawing her hand through the clear stream.

"Happy," she repeated, rather to herself than to him; "I can safely say this, that I have had so much happiness since I have been here that if I were wretched all my life afterward I should still have had far more happiness than falls to the lot of many people."

She remembered those words in after years; and she owned to herself that they had been most perfectly true.

The few months passed at River View had been most perfectly happy – no shade of care had come over her, no doubt, no fear – nothing that chilled the warmth of her love, nothing that marred its perfect trust. In some lives there comes a pause of silent, intense bliss just before the storm, even as the wind rests before the hurricane.

"You make me very proud, Leone," said Lord Chandos, "when you tell me of your happiness; I can only say may it be like the light of heaven, eternal."

CHAPTER XIV. "TRUE UNTIL DEATH."

For some long months that case stood on the records. Every paper in England had some mention of it; as a rule people laughed when they read anything about it. They said it was a case of Corydon and Phyllis, a dairy-maid's love, a farce, a piece of romantic nonsense on the part of a young nobleman who ought to know better. It created no sensation; the papers did not make much of it; they simply reported a petition on the part of the Right Honorable the Earl of Lanswell and Lucia, his wife, that the so-called marriage contracted by their son, Lancelot, Lord Chandos, should be set aside as illegal, on account of his being a minor, and having married without their consent.

There was a long hearing, a long consideration, a long lawsuit; and it was, as every one had foreseen it would be, in favor of the earl against his son. The marriage was declared null and void – the contract illegal; there could be no legal marriage on Lord Chandos' side without the full and perfect consent of his parents.

When that decision was given, Lady Lanswell smiled. Mr. Sewell congratulated her on it. My lady smiled again.

"I may thank the law," she said, "which frees my son from the consequences of his own folly."

"Remember," said the lawyer, "that he can marry her, my lady, when he comes of age."

"I know perfectly well that he will not," replied the countess; but Mr. Sewell did not feel so sure.

The earl, the countess, and the solicitor sat together at Dunmore House, in solemn consultation; they were quite uncertain what should be the next step taken. Due legal notice had been given Lord Chandos; he had simply torn the paper into shreds and laughed at it – laughed at the idea that any law, human or divine, could separate him from his young wife; he took no notice of it; he never appeared in answer to any inquiry or summons; he answered no questions; the lawyer into whose hands he had half laughingly placed the whole matter had everything to do for him, and wondered at the recklessness with which the young lord treated the whole affair.

It was all over now; and the decree which had parted them, which severed the tie between them, had gone forth – the marriage was void and worth nothing.

The matrons of Belgravia who read it said it was perfectly right; there was no doubt that he had been inveigled into it; and if such a thing were allowed to go unpunished there would be no more safety for their curled darlings; they would be at the mercy of any designing, underbred girl who chose to angle for them.

Men of the world smiled as they read it, and thought Lord Chandos well out of what might have been a very serious trouble. Young people thought little about it; the Belgravian belles merely said one to another that Lord Chandos had been in some kind of trouble, but that his parents had extricated him. And then all comment ended; even the second day after the judgment was given it had been forgotten.

When the Countess of Lanswell held in her hands the letter which told her the desire of her heart was granted, and her son free, for a few moments she was startled; her handsome face paled, her hands trembled; it had been a desperate step, but she had won. She had the greatest faith in her own resources; she felt a certain conviction that in the end she would win; but for one moment she was half startled at her own success.

"Let us send for Lance here to Cawdor," she said to the earl, "while Mr. Sewell sees the girl and arranges with her. He must have *carte blanche* over money matters; whatever he thinks fit to mention I shall agree to. If a thousand a year contents her, I am willing."

"Yes, yes – it is no question of money," said the earl. "It will be a great trouble to her naturally, and we are bound to make what compensation we can. If you wish me to send for Lance I will do so at once. I will send a telegram from the station at Dunmore; he will be here soon after noon."

There had been little or no communication between the young heir and his parents since the lawsuit began. Once or twice Lord Chandos and the earl had met; but the earl always refused to discuss matters with him.

"You must talk to my lady, my dear boy," he would reply; "you know that she manages everything;" and Lord Chandos, fearing no evil, laughed at what he considered an amiable weakness on his father's part.

"I love my wife," he said to himself, "but no woman should ever be so completely mistress of me. I shall always keep my independence, even though I love my wife perhaps better than any man living; but I will never give up my independence."

He was somewhat startled that morning in September to find a telegram waiting him at River View, from Cawdor, stating that Lord Lanswell wished him to take the first train, as he had news of the utmost importance to him. Lady Lanswell, who was a most complete woman of the world, had warily contrived that a piece of real good fortune should at the same time fall to his lot. She had great influence at court, and she had used it to some purpose. There was a royal wedding on the Continent, and he was one of the two English noblemen chosen as the representatives of English royalty. There could be no refusal of such an honor, Lady Lanswell knew that; and she, knowing that Lord Chandos would be delighted over it, had used all her influence, hoping that it would distract his attention from the decision given and from his wife. She had arranged a little programme in her mind – how it should all be managed; she would send a telegram summoning him to Cawdor; she would first show him the letter of appointment, induce him to answer by accepting it, then when the letter accepting the appointment had gone, and he was committed beyond recall, she would tell him the judicial decision over his marriage.

The telegram reached River View one morning when Lord Chandos and Leone sat at a late breakfast-table, Leone looking like a radiant spring morning, her beautiful face, with its exquisite coloring, and her dainty dress of amber and white.

"A telegram," she said. "Oh, Lance, how I dread the sight of those yellow envelopes; they always fill me with horror; they always seem to be the harbinger of bad news."

He kissed the beautiful face before he opened the telegram.

"There is no very bad news here," he said. "I must go to Cawdor at once; my father has some very important news for me."

Some instinct seemed to warn her of coming danger; she rose from her seat and went over to him; she laid her tender arms round his neck; she laid her beautiful face on his.

"It means harm to us, Lance," she said; "I am sure of it."

"Nonsense, my darling," he cried; "how can it be about us? Most likely there is a general election, or some business of that kind coming on, and he wants to see me about it."

Still the beautiful face grew paler, and the shadows deepened in the dark eyes.

"Shall you go at once?" she asked.

Lord Chandos looked at his watch.

"The train starts at twelve," he said. "I must go in half an hour's time, Leone."

"Half an hour," she said, and the tender hands clasped him more tightly, "only half an hour, Lance?"

Some prophetic instinct seemed to come over her; the passionate love on her beautiful face deepened into tragedy; yet he had never breathed one word to her of what had taken place. She knew nothing of the lawsuit; and Lord Chandos never intended her to know anything about it; but with the chill of that autumn morning came a chill of doubt and fear such as she had never known before.

"How long shall you be away?" she asked.

"Not one moment longer than I am compelled to stay," he replied. "If my father really wants to see me on election affairs I may be absent two days; trust me, Leone; the first moment I am free I shall return;" and drawing her beautiful face down to his own the young husband kissed it with passionate devotion, little dreaming of what lay before him.

"Only half an hour," said Leone. "Oh, Lance, let me spend it with you. I will order your portmanteau to be packed; my dear, do not let me leave you for one moment."

She drew a little stool and sat down at his feet.

Lord Chandos laughed.

"One would think we were lovers still."

She looked at him with that wonderful expression of face, so earnest, so intent, so lofty.

"So we are," she said; "we will be lovers until we die; shall we not, Lance?"

"I hope so; but we shall be unlike most married people, Leone, if we do that," he replied.

"I will not believe you," she answered. "You laugh, sometimes, Lance, at love; but I am sure if I were your wife for fifty years you would never tire of me or love me less."

"I never wish to do so," he replied.

"You never will," said Leone, "my faith is as strong as my love, and you have it all. I could rather believe now that the heavens would fall over my head than you could ever for one moment forget me."

"I shall never forget you, sweet," he said; "this is the first time we have ever been parted since we have been married; you must not be sad and lonely, Leone."

"I shall spend all my time in thinking of your return," she said. "Lance, it will comfort me all the time you are away; you will say some of those beautiful words I love to hear."

He took both her white hands in his.

"My darling," he said, "I love you with all my heart, and I will be true to you until death."

The sweetness of the words seemed to content her for a time; she laid her face on his hands for some minutes in wistful silence.

"Leone," said the rich, cheerful voice of the young earl, "I have an idea that I will bring you good news from home. My father would not have sent for me unless he wanted me, and I shall make a bargain with him. If he wants me to do anything, I shall consent only on condition that I take you to Cawdor."

They talked of it for some minutes; then Leone rose and busied herself for some time in helping him – her face was pale and her hands trembled. When the moment came for him to say good-bye he held her in his arms.

"Once again," she whispered.

And he answered:

"My darling wife, I love you, and will be true to you until death."

And those were the last words that for some time she heard him speak.

CHAPTER XV. AN EXCITING INTERVIEW

Lady Lanswell looked somewhat startled when her son entered the room. During those few months of his married life he had altered much; he looked taller and stronger; the handsome face was covered with a golden beard and mustache; he looked quite three years older than before his marriage.

He was a handsome stripling when his mother kissed him and sent him, with many injunctions as to study, to Dr. Hervey's, a handsome stripling, with golden down on his lip, and the hue of a ripe peach on his face; now he was a man of the world, assured, confident, easy in his carriage and bearing.

He looked at his mother with half-defiance, half-amusement in his eyes.

The strong, handsome woman, whose brave nature had never known fear, trembled for one moment when she remembered what she had to tell her son.

He bent down to kiss her, and for one moment her heart relented to her son. She steeled herself with the recollection that what she had done was for his benefit.

"I have good news for you, Lance," she said, with her stately grace; "very excellent news."

"I am glad to hear it, mother," replied Lord Chandos, thinking to himself how much more this interview resembled that of a queen and a crown prince than of mother and son.

"You have traveled quickly and would probably like some refreshment – you would like a glass of Madeira?"

The truth was that her ladyship herself, with all her courage, felt that she required some artificial stimulant – the courage and pride of the proudest woman in England ebbed; she feared what she had to say.

"An honor has been bestowed on you," she said, "one which would make any peer in England proud."

His face brightened – he was keenly susceptible to the flattery implied in his mother's words.

"You have been asked, together with Lord Dunferline, to represent our gracious sovereign at the marriage of the Princess Caroline at Hemsburg. Such an invitation, I need not tell you, is equivalent to a royal command."

"I know it, mother, and I am delighted," he said, wondering in his own mind if he should be able to take Leone with him.

"The notice is rather short," continued the countess; "but that is owing to some delay on the part of Lord Dunferline. I hear that you are the envy of every man at the club. You will have to leave England for Germany in three days; to-morrow you must be at the palace. I congratulate you, Lance; it is very seldom that a man so young as you receives so signal a favor."

He knew it, and was proud accordingly; yet he said to himself that Leone must go with him; he could not live without Leone.

Lady Lanswell continued:

"Your father is delighted over it; I cannot tell you how pleased he is."

Then Lord Chandos looked wonderingly around.

"Where is my father?" he said. "I have not seen him yet."

Lady Lanswell knew that he would not see him. The earl had fled ignominiously; he had declined to be present at the grand fracas between his wife and his son; he had left it all in my lady's hands.

"Your father had some business that took him away this morning; he knew that I could say for him all that he had to say."

Lord Chandos smiled, and the smile was not, perhaps, the most respectful in the world. My lady did not observe it.

"I am quite sure," he said, "that you can interpret all my father's ideas."

It was then, with her son's handsome face smiling down on her, that the countess grew pale and laid her hand, with instinctive fear, on the papers spread before her. She nerved herself for the struggle; it would never do to give way.

"I have other news for you, Lance," she said, and he looked with clear, bright, defiant eyes in her face.

She drew herself to her full height, as though the very attitude gave the greatest strength; there was no bend, no yielding in her. Stern, erect, proud, she looked full in her son's face; it was as though they were measuring their strength one against the other.

"I have never said to you, Lance, what I thought of this wretched mistake you call your marriage," she began; "my contempt and indignation were too great that you should dare to give the grand old name you bear to a dairy-maid."

Leone's beautiful Spanish face flashed before him, and he laughed at the word dairy-maid; she was peerless as a queen.

"Dare is not the word to use to a man, mother," he retorted.

"Nor should I use it to a man," said my lady, with a satirical smile. "I am not speaking to a man, but to a hot-headed boy; a man has self-control, self-denial, self-restraint, you have none; a man weighs the honor of his name or his race in his hands; a man hesitates before he degrades a name that kings have delighted to honor, before he ruins hopelessly the prestige of a grand old race for the sake of a dairy-maid. You, a hot-headed, foolish boy, have done all this; therefore, I repeat that I am not speaking to a man."

"You use strong language, mother," he said.

"I feel strongly; my contempt is strong," she said. "I know not why so great a humiliation should have fallen on me as that my son – the son of whom I was proud – should be the first to bring shame on his name."

"I have brought no shame on it, mother," he said, angrily.

"No shame!" said the countess, bitterly. "I can read, fancy, the short annals of the Lanswells – 'Hubert, Earl Lanswell, died while fighting loyally for his king and his country; Ross, Earl Lanswell, was famed for political services; Lancelot, Earl Lanswell, married a dairy-maid.' I would rather," she cried, with flashing eyes, "that you had died in your childhood, than lived to bring such bitter shame on a loyal race."

His face grew pale with anger, as the bitter words were hurled at him.

"Will you understand, once for all, mother, that I have *not* married a dairy-maid?" he cried. "My wife is a wonder of beauty; she is dainty and lovely as a princess. Only see her, you would change your opinion at once."

"I hope never to do that. As for seeing her, I shall never so far lose my own self-respect as to allow such a person to speak to me."

Lord Chandos shook his head with a rueful smile.

"If you had ever seen Leone, mother, you would laugh at the idea of calling her a person," he said.

Lady Lanswell moved her hand with a gesture of superb pride.

"Nay, do not continue the subject. If the girl was not actually a dairy-maid, in all probability she was not far removed from it. I have no wish to discuss the question. You have stained the hitherto stainless name of your family by the wretched mistake you call a marriage."

"I do not *call* it a marriage; it *is* one," he said.

And then my lady's face grew even paler.

"It is not one. I thank Heaven that the law of the land is just and good; that it very properly refuses to recognize the so-called marriage of a hot-headed boy. You have ignored our letters on the subject, you have laughed at all threats, treated with disdain all advice; now you will find your level.

The judicial decree has been pronounced; the marriage you have talked of with such bravado is no marriage; the woman you have insulted me by mentioning is not your wife."

She neither trembled nor faltered when he turned to her with a white, set face.

"Pardon me; I must speak plainly; that which you have said is a lie!"

"You forget yourself, Lord Chandos," she said, with cold dignity.

"You force me to use words I do not like, mother," he cried "Why do you irritate me – why say those things?"

"They are perfectly true; here on the table lie the papers relative to the suit; the judicial opinion has been pronounced; our petition is granted, and your marriage, as you choose to call it, is set aside, is pronounced illegal, null, void!"

The fierce, white anger of his face startled her.

"It shall not be!" he cried.

"It must be," she repeated; "you cannot prevent it. You must have been singularly devoid of penetration and knowledge not to know from the first that it must be decided against you; that no minor can marry without the consent of his parents. A wise law it is, too; there would soon be an end of the aristocracy of England if every hot-headed, foolish boy of nineteen could marry without the consent of his parents or guardian."

If his antagonist had been a man, there would have been hot, angry words, perhaps blows; as it was, to a lady, and that lady his mother, he could say nothing. He sunk back with a white face and clinched hands; his mother resolutely stifled all pity, and went on, in her clear voice:

"The law has decided for us against you; you know now the truth. If you have any respect for that unfortunate girl, you will not see her again; she is not your wife, she is not married to you. I need not speak more plainly; you know what relationship she will hold to you if you do not leave her at once."

The handsome face had in these five minutes grown quite haggard and worn.

"My God!" he cried; "I refuse to believe it, I refuse to believe one word of it!"

With her clear, pitiless voice, she went on telling him what would happen.

"You have one resource," she said, "and I tell you quite honestly about it; when you are of age you can remarry this person if you wish."

He sprung from his seat with a cry of wounded pain and love.

"Mother, is it really true?" he asked. "I married that young girl before Heaven, and you tell me that if I persist in returning to her she loses her fair name! If it be so, you have done a very cruel thing."

"It is so," said my lady, coldly. "I grant that it seems cruel, but better that than tarnish the name of a whole race."

"I shall remarry Leone, mother, the day after I am twenty-one," he said.

The countess raised her eyebrows.

"The same man does not often make a simpleton of himself in the same fashion, but if you will do it, you will. For the present, if you have any regard for the person who is not your wife, you will let her go home again. I will return and talk over your journey with you."

So saying, the Countess of Lanswell quitted the room, leaving her son overwhelmed with a sense of defeat.

CHAPTER XVI. LEONE'S DETERMINATION

Lucia, Countess of Lanswell, stood alone in the superb drawing-room at Cawdor. It was evening, one of the warmest and brightest in September. Nearly three months had passed since the fatal marriage which had grieved and distressed her, and now she fondly hoped all her distress was ended. The decree had gone forth that the marriage was null and void; was, in fact, no marriage, Lord Chandos being under age when it was contracted. She said to herself all was null now. True, her son was in a most furious rage, and he had gone to consult half the lawyers in London, but she did not care for that; he was sure to rage and rave; he was a spoiled child, who never in his life had been contradicted or thwarted. The more angry he was the better; she knew by experience the hotter the fire the more quickly it burns away. Had he been cool, calm, collected and silent she would have dreaded the after consequences.

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